

A TRINITY OF BELIEFS AND A UNITY OF THE SACRED:  
MODERN VODOU PRACTICES IN NEW ORLEANS

A Thesis

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Daniel Crocker, who so faithfully came with me to all of the Vodou ceremonies. Thank you for all of your support, care and patience. I love you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the ways in which Vodou is practiced in New Orleans today. Tourism has capitalized off the exotic appeal of Vodou but that does not rule out the actual practice of the religion in these public retail settings. Generations of New Orleanians have been raised in the religion and while their practices are often secret, Vodou lies beneath the surface of spaces and events going on in the city. Immigrants and converts that have been trained in Haitian Vodou have come into New Orleans, influencing and interacting with the spirituality of the Crescent City. These practices separate themselves into different spheres but they intersect along a web of shared meanings, symbols and spaces. The hybridity of Vodou in New Orleans means that the believers' history and the present is constantly being reinterpreted and recreated while still maintaining meaningful ties to the past.

## PREFACE

A choice that I had to make was to decide on the spelling of Vodou, the names of the *lwas* and other religious concepts and items. Since Vodou is primarily an oral tradition, the spellings vary not only between New Orleans and Haiti but within writings about the same locations. Debates over the use of “Voodoo” have raged back and forth with some groups vehemently opposed to the “Voodoo” spelling and others embracing it (see the argument between Donald Cosentino and Harold Courlander over the word’s use in an exhibit review in the May 1988 issue of *African Arts*). The term Vodou has multiple spellings (Voodoo, Voudoun, Vaudoux, Vodun etc.) which have varied in popularity over time and space. According to Alasdair Pettinger, the terms Vaudoux and Vaudou were originally used by the French colonists to describe ritual practices in colonial Saint-Domingue. After Haitian independence, Vodou practices were suppressed and little is written about them until Faustin Soulouque came into power in the mid 1800’s. At this time Haitians began to call their religious societies *les vaudous*. Many writings at this time were used to legitimize white dominance through portrayals of Vodou as evil and cannibalistic (Pettinger 2004).

These terms also began to show up in writings and court cases to do with New Orleans, Louisiana around the same time. Enslaved people from West Africa and waves of immigrants from Haiti led to a strong Vodou presence in the city. Its Creole French speakers heavily influenced New Orleans so the religion was usually spelled as Vodou but eventually it came to be referred to as Voodoo. Yet, this term has taken on more than just the strictly religious beliefs and practices of people in Louisiana and Haiti. Terms like “voodoo economics” and references to anything superstitious or magical as being simply “voodoo” have watered down its meaning

and given it a negative connotation. To counter this, scholars today usually refer to the religion as Vodou, the Creole orthography, to distinguish it as a religion and to distance the scholars from sensationalistic violence that filled past writings on Voodoo (Pettinger 2004).

It is also worth noting that some Vodouists do not use the word “Vodou” at all when referring to their religion. Brenda Marie Osbey says that people raised in New Orleans traditions call it The Religion or The Community of the Faithful. This is in large part due to the negative connotations the word Vodou carries and the secretive nature of the religion in parts of New Orleans. However, it is necessary to pick a term that can refer to all practitioners. I have therefore chosen to use the spelling “Vodou” in my work despite some of my research population embracing alternate spellings. I have also settled on using the terminology and *lwa* spellings found in *Manbo* Sallie Ann Glassman’s book *Vodou Visions* (2000) both because she is one of my most important sources and because it was necessary to choose a consistent method of spelling. My decisions on spellings do not reflect an opinion one way or the other on how the *lwas* names should be spelled and a look into the literature and Vodouists today will reveal a plethora of variations.

To aid in the reading of this thesis, some frequent terms and a brief definition are listed below.

***Asson:*** A ritual rattle that can only be used by a *Manbo* or *Oungan*.

***Ayizan:*** The wife of *Loko*, the *lwa Ayizan* was the first *Manbo*.

***Baron Samedi:*** Represented as a skeleton in a top hat, he is the *lwa* of death.

***Botanica:*** Store that sells items for ritual and magical purposes.

***The Community of the Faithful:*** Term that believers raised in Vodou in New Orleans use for



their community. Also called The Faithful.

**Damballah:** The primordial serpent *Iwa*, *Damballah* created the world and the other *Iwas*.

**Drapo:** Sequined flags depicting the *Iwas*

**Ezili Dantor:** A fiery mother spirit, the *Iwa Ezili Dantor* is the sister and enemy of *Ezili Freda*.

**Ezili Freda:** A passionate love spirit, the *Iwa Ezili Freda* is the sister and enemy of *Ezili Dantor*.

**Gede:** A trickster, *Gede* is the *Iwa* of the dead.

**Horse:** The person who is possessed during a ceremony. The *Iwa* mounts the horse.

**Lasiren:** A mermaid, *Lasiren* is the *Iwa* of the ocean and protects fishermen.

**Loko:** The husband of *Ayizan*, the *Iwa Loko* was the first *Oungan*.

**Lwa:** A powerful spirit that is honored in Haitian Vodou. A *Iwa* was once a human being or animal in the earthly realm, but now lives in the spirit world. *Lwas* have the power to help humans and can possess practitioners.

**Manbo:** A Haitian Vodou priestess.

**Marassa:** The sacred twins, the *Iwa Marassa* are the dual forces of the universe.

**Met tete:** The *Iwa* that is most closely connected with a particular Vodouist.

**Ogou:** A warrior spirit, the *Iwa Ogou* is associated with St. Michael.

**Ounfo:** A Vodou community belonging to a *peristyle*.

**Oungan:** A Haitian Vodou priest.

**Ounsi:** A Haitian Vodou initiate.

**Peristyle:** A Haitian Vodou temple.

**The Religion:** Term that believers raised in Vodou in New Orleans use for their faith.

**Veve:** Sacred symbol that corresponds with a particular *Iwa*. When ritually activated, a *veve*

draws that specific *lwa* to the ceremony.

**Vodou:** A syncretic religion found in the New World. Vodou is the preferred spelling of the more pejorative word Voodoo.

**Voodoo:** The same as Vodou, but due to negative associations this spelling is sometimes found offensive.

**The Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau:** A (in)famous Vodou practitioner from the 1800's. Her story is still an important for tourists and practitioners alike.

## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTION

The members of the temple eased the priestess to the floor as she trembled from the possession. A few moments passed in tense silence and then the priestess raised her head. The shaking was gone, replaced by calm determination. Her eyes intensely explored the temple and the faces of the faithful. Dutifully, they brought her the offerings of corn, rum and meat. For the priestess was no longer herself. The fiery spirit *Ezili Dantor*, a Haitian Vodou *lwa*, had possessed her. *Ezili Dantor* glanced at the offerings and took hold of the machete lying on the ground, brandishing it at the servators until they began dancing once more. Her tongue having been cut out in life, she kept silent even when possessing a body that could speak. Instead, she made her wishes known with the sword and her eyes. She pulled the Vodouists aside one by one, taking a swig of rum and spraying their faces with the liquor. They closed their eyes and tilted back their heads as they received the mother spirit's blessing. After anointing each Vodouist, *Ezili Dantor* departed for the spirit realm, leaving the priestess once more trembling on the floor. Faces sticky with rum and sweat, the group knelt on the cement and bowed for the final prayer.

Though Haitian in origin, this ceremony occurred May 5, 2007, in a temple in New Orleans, Louisiana. Enslaved Africans, brought to the New World by the French and Spanish, were forcibly converted to Catholicism, the religion of their masters. Yet these enslaved people were able to incorporate their West African religious beliefs within this new dominant system. Initially the form was Catholic for whites' eyes but African in meaning, but over time the form and meaning integrated into one religious system - Vodou. In Haiti and New Orleans, these two groups of enslaved people developed their syncretic faiths separately, eventually creating

unique religious systems. Yet their similar origins and comparable social conditions resulted in two forms of Vodou that, while different, still shared many common elements. The porous and flexible nature of this mixture meant that new ideas, beliefs, systems and symbols were always being introduced, evaluated and incorporated. In this sense, the hybridity of Vodou was not a onetime event but rather a process that continues to change and develop even today.

Vodouists from Haiti have been immigrating to New Orleans since the Haitian revolution in 1804, and bring their own religious beliefs to a city already steeped in a history of Vodou. Yet the Vodouists descended from the original New Orleans enslaved do not recognize the ceremony above as being part of their belief system. Group rituals, possessions, and temples are not part of their Vodou practices (or as they prefer to call it, The Religion.) Nevertheless, both of these religious systems identify with the term Vodou and share sacred spaces in the city. Presently these two Vodous have come together in the city of New Orleans and now must share more than just a history and a name. Both groups hold spaces such as graveyards and Congo Square sacred. Each also creates sacred spaces in private and public, creating a web of meanings that intersect one another. Tourist operations have capitalized off both aspects, creating their own place in the city. Yet despite efforts of some believers to keep their faith pure, the walls of their cultural boundaries are porous and these three aspects of Vodou share many spaces and symbols.

Tourist shops and sites profit from both of these types of Vodou, tapping into the history of The Religion in New Orleans through places and historical figures while marketing with Haitian symbols and terms. They package them as one unified religion while mixing in exotic and exciting elements that neither faith identifies with. Practitioners who sell to and

perform for tourists further blur these lines. Tour guides and travel books weave a path through New Orleans space and history that incorporates sacred spaces for both groups of Vodouists. These spheres of tourist and practitioner merge at points along the city, creating layers of overlapping perceptions and experiences of sacred areas.

This thesis therefore explores the ways in which Vodou is practiced in New Orleans today and the connections these different groups have in space and symbols. Members of The Religion who are raised in New Orleans Vodou practice their faith privately and in secret. They create altars in the private spaces of their homes to connect to the ancestors, but they also make offerings in the public spaces of graveyards. Vodouists trained in Haiti conduct ceremonies weekly in private temples and monthly in public spaces. The open nature of their faith allows for converts and public consumption of many rituals. Tourists can engage in public altars and rituals and purchase items in botanicas run by practitioners. Guided tours and travel books link tourists to the points along the city that hold spiritual power for the practitioners, weaving intertwining paths throughout New Orleans.

Tourist Vodou, The Religion and Haitian forms have all come together in the city. These New Orleans Vodou practices separate themselves into different spheres but they intersect along a web of shared meanings, symbols and spaces. The hybridity of the Vodouists' pasts and presents is constantly being reinterpreted and recreated while still maintaining meaningful ties to their history. Many spaces in the city are liminal in nature, often being a threshold between the sacred and the secular, a container for both public and private and the divine and the profane all at the same time. These in-between places are not contradictory spaces but rather crossroads between this world and the next. New Orleans is a trinity of Vodou beliefs that

combine into shared symbols and meanings. As one Vodouist said, the city is the path of *Papa Legba* who guards the crossroads, a portal to the sacred but situated on the secular existence of New Orleans.

## CHAPTER 2.

### SCHOLARLY WORK ON VODOU

Many anthropologists have researched Vodou in Haiti, but few have studied modern day Vodou in New Orleans. The last full-length ethnographic work is Zora Neale Hurston's from the 1930s. More recently, anthropologists and historians have looked at the life and religion of the famous Vodou Queen Marie Laveau but they do not discuss current practices. Despite this lack of scholarly work on the subject, there has been no shortage of sensational pieces written about Vodou in New Orleans. Authors such as Robert Tallant exaggerated and even made up stories about the religion to entice readers. These works have all influenced the way the public sees Vodou and are part of the discourse among Vodouists today.

Zora Neale Hurston researched Vodou (or as she called it, Hoodoo) in America in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She met a number of Vodouists and even became initiated into the religion, as detailed in her lengthy article 'Hoodoo in America' in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1931 (this research was later published in her book *Mules and Men*). She collected spells, cures, folktales and memories about Vodou from a number of interviews. However, as Ina Fandrich points out, much of the information she gathered about Vodou came from, "interviewees in advanced age recollecting childhood memories." (2005:11) Nevertheless, she did manage to find quite a number of people who still practiced the religion and magic and initiated under them. However, the descriptions of rituals and interviews are not detailed nor does her work contain information about how these beliefs related to everyday life.

Though Huston published this research in the 1930s, Vodouists in New Orleans still debate and discuss her work. Some of my interviewees cast doubts upon the validity of

Hurston's research since New Orleans Vodouists today do not have initiations nor do they share most of the beliefs she discusses. One interviewee was particularly vehement about Hurston and even made the comment that her research was so detrimental to the public's perceptions of Vodou even today that if she could go back in time and kill her again she would. Brenda Marie Osbey said that she believes the majority of Hurston's work is fiction. Another interviewee suggested that Hurston was conned. It is possible that Hurston was mistaken but she also conducted her research more than seventy years ago during which time practices and beliefs may have changed drastically. Either way, the fact that Hurston's research is still debated and contested reveals a need for more ethnographic work on Vodou practices in New Orleans.

Perhaps the most famous researcher was Robert Tallant who wrote a number of books about New Orleans, including his "non-fiction" work *Voodoo in New Orleans*, published in 1946. He conducted interviews with locals, looked at old newspaper articles, and used interviews done by the Louisiana Writers Project during the Great Depression (Fandrich, 2005). However, other scholars harshly criticized him for altering the facts and sometimes making things up to create a more exciting and sexy story. His informants often have numerous rumors and wild tales about Vodou, but there is little if any fact to back them up. For example, at one point he quotes a French woman as saying, "She [Marie Laveau] killed babies that were not wanted by their mothers. She used to hang their bodies up in her chimney like hams and smoke them." (Tallant, 1946: 89) The stories he collected were certainly valuable as folklore and to illuminate how many locals felt about Vodou, but it fails both as an ethnographic work and as a collection of folk tales. As Alan Swallow, who reviewed the book, said, "Thus he seems to have very little



conception of what he really has hold of, as if suddenly a hot potato were dropped into his hands and he did not know anything to do except to jump about and scream” (1947: 300). Other reviews such as Marcus Christian’s were even less kind and listed Tallant’s many mistakes and errors (1946). Zora Neale Hurston’s 1947 review of his book, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, methodically goes through his writing and points out his numerous errors. Hurston says, “It offers no opportunity for serious study, and should be considered for just what it is, a creative-journalistic appeal to popular fancy” (1947: 438). Clearly, Robert Tallant is not a good source of accurate information about New Orleans Vodou practices.

However, Tallant’s book continues to influence public perceptions and is still cited as a reputable source in academic works (see Jacobs 1989, Gauthier and Ackermann 1991, Liverpool 1998, Picone 2003.) The exciting nature of his stories and writing style make his books common items for sale in tourist shops. One of the women involved in Haitian Vodou in New Orleans said that her mother believes she kills babies and eats them because of Tallant’s book. Many of the other members of this group agreed that numerous misconceptions they encounter stem from sources such as Tallant’s work.

More recently, a number of authors have written about Marie Laveau, the (in)famous Vodou Queen, and Vodou as it was practiced while she lived. In 1994, Ina Johanna Fandrich wrote her thesis on Marie Laveau and then updated it in 2005 with new information she uncovered. As she says, her thesis was “the first book-length study of New Orleans’ Voodoo since Robert Tallant’s sensationalistic, and in many ways, racist classic *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 1946” (2005:3). She spent quite a lot of time and effort uncovering records from the Archdiocese, governmental offices, newspapers and other sources about Marie Laveau’s real

life. She does a wonderful job showing the role free women of color played in keeping the religion alive as well as documenting the historical and mythical Marie Laveau. Martha Ward has also written a book about the legendary religious leader, *Voodoo Queen: the Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*. Her book is eloquent and beautifully written, and paints a more realistic view of Marie Laveau's life than books such as Tallant's.

Carolyn Morrow Long has also written about Vodou in New Orleans. She was a research associate at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institute until she retired in 2001. In that year, she published *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce* in 2001, in which she discusses Vodou shops in New Orleans, among other topics. However, she does not explore in depth the actual rituals, practices and religion of Vodou. In 2006, she also wrote a book about The Queen entitled *A New Orleans Priestess: the Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. She relied heavily on the interviews in the Louisiana Writers' Project, historical records and the Archdiocese records. Her work continues in the same vein as Fandrich, with a focus on the historical and the mythical Marie Laveau. It also has a good chapter on Vodou in New Orleans at the time of Marie Laveau. Her book is a solid academic work and very informative, but like the other biographies of Marie Laveau, it contains little discussion of modern Vodou.

Marie Laveau has long been a staple of tour guides and tourist shops. However, Vodouists also incorporate her legacy into the ways they define themselves. Members of The Religion reject her as an authentic practitioner but Haitian Vodouists embrace her as part of New Orleans' Vodou heritage. Debates about the facts surrounding her life still surface in modern discussions among practitioners and owners of tourist venues. Some of the authors of these books about Marie Laveau have even explored the history of the Vodou Queen by

participating in modern practices. Martha Ward was at two ceremonies I attended and she invited *Manbo Sallie Ann's* Vodou community to her wedding. Therefore, even though Marie Laveau died almost a hundred and fifty years ago, these works on her life are important for understanding why her legacy is still important for modern practitioners.

Other authors have written about contemporary aspects of Vodou in New Orleans. Steve Pile, in his book *Real Cities*, explores the mystery and emotion behind some of the world's most intriguing cities including New Orleans (2005). Ron Bodin wrote the booklet *Voodoo: Past and Present* in 1990, which does briefly touch on modern Vodou practices, but it is a relatively short work. Joseph Holloway also included a chapter on New Orleans Vodou in his book *Africanisms in American Culture* (1990). However, in all of my research, I have not come across a single ethnographic work on modern Vodou in New Orleans, and no academic work dedicated solely to the subject since Zora Neale Hurston's work in the 1930s. An ethnographic work on modern Louisiana Vodou is long overdue.

However, scholars have conducted extensive research on Vodou in Haiti and this is worth looking at even if this body of work does not focus on practices in Louisiana. Haitian and New Orleans Vodou practices do have many commonalities since both developed due to influences of Catholicism on West African religious practices of the enslaved. The environment and social conditions that enslaved found themselves in both locales were also similar and after the Haitian revolution, numerous Vodouists fled to New Orleans. More recently, Vodouists trained in Haiti have become active in New Orleans; some have even begun training, and initiating New Orleanians into this Haitian form of the religion.

Melville Herskovits wrote a number of articles and books about Vodou in Haiti, West Africa and the creolization of beliefs that have occurred in the New World (1933, 1937, 1965, 1966 and 1967). He used the term “syncretism” to talk about this blending of ideas and beliefs in Vodou that many other scholars have adapted for other cultural groups. This theory of syncretism explained why when faced with new influences and power situations those aspects which can be molded to fit into the new cultural system are retained while other elements fade away. In the case of Vodou, he described the form as Catholic but the meaning African in nature. His work has been highly influential and syncretism is still an important concept for understanding Vodou.

Maya Deren wrote *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti*. She traveled to Haiti in 1947 to make a documentary by the same name and ended up initiating in the religion. Her descriptions of ceremonies and settings are rich with detail and poetry, and she discusses her personal experiences with the *lwa* (1953). Alfred Metraux wrote *Voodoo in Haiti* after years of research and it details the rituals and belief systems of the Vodouists in a less personal manner than Deren (1959). Milo Rigaud, who was born and raised in the Haitian Vodou tradition, wrote *Secrets of Voodoo*. He explains many of the terms, practices and spirits associated with the religion in order to educate outsiders about the reality of his religion. All of these works provide important definitions and explanations that are valuable for understanding Haitian Vodou practices going on in New Orleans today.

## CHAPTER 3.

### METHODS AND HISTORY

#### Capturing the Spiritual

Although I was born in New Orleans and have lived in South Louisiana all my life, I was not personally connected to anyone that would discuss the Vodou religion with me. Therefore, I had to find practitioners through other means such as phone books, friends, professors and websites. These sources provided more public, and at times, touristy connections to practitioners, but many of these initial contacts became important for my research project. My first step was to set up meetings in New Orleans with some of these contacts so I could become familiar with the culture of Vodou in the city. This included visits to tourist shops and popular Vodou sites, as well as interviews with people who practiced the religion. This allowed me later to attend rituals and interview members who are not as public as those that appeared on websites and in phone books.

The word "Voodoo" appears on almost every street corner in New Orleans – from bars to tourist shops to haunted ghost tours. Numerous shops sell "Voodoo" dolls and *gris-gris* bags (charms) right next to hot sauce and alcoholic drink mixes. Humorous t-shirts, post cards, music festivals and even the local arena football team have all appropriated the word. Commercial vendors use Vodou to market their shops and tours to tourists. My initial reaction was to ignore this aspect and try to find less tourist oriented aspects of Vodou in Louisiana. However, I came to discover the line between the commercial use of Vodou and those who actually practice it is not as clear as it might seem.

Through my e-mails, I was able to secure interviews with four individuals involved in Vodou in New Orleans. The first was Priestess Miriam Chamani who runs the New Orleans Vodou Spiritual Temple on North Rampart Street. Her background is in Spiritualist Churches but her husband, the late Priest Oswan Chamani, was raised in Obeah, a Belizean type of Vodou. She has a small store stocked with incense, candles, charms etc. that connects to the temple. Secondly, I interviewed Jerry Gandolfo who runs the New Orleans Historic Vodou Museum on Dumaine Street. He does not practice the religion but he does know a large number of practitioners and has an altar at the museum that has been appropriated by Vodouists for their own spiritual use. Next, I contacted *Manbo* Sallie Ann Glassman who runs the Isle of Salvation Botanica as well as *La Source Ancienne Ounfo*, a Vodou community. She was not raised in the tradition but she initiated under Papa Edgar in Haiti where she frequently travels. *Manbo* Sallie Ann became one of my most important informants because she invited me to attend and participate in her *Ounfo's* weekly rituals. Through her, I was able to meet a number of participants and get a much better understanding of the religion. Lastly, I interviewed Brenda Marie Osbey, the poet laureate for Louisiana and a lifelong Vodouist. She was born and raised in the tradition and provided information on many aspects of her religion though certain elements are secret.

After meeting with these individuals, I realized how misguided my idea of ignoring the commercial aspect of Vodou was. Priestess Miriam and *Manbo* Sallie Ann were both very dedicated to the practice of Vodou as a religion and impressed me with their sincerity. However, they also sell charms, candles and other items in stores that they run and are hired to

perform rituals. I soon discovered this was the case with many practitioners, especially the more public figures that I had better access to. Clearly, I could not disregard Vodouists who make money off aspects of their religion nor would it be accurate to ignore this side of them in my work. Further research into the history of Vodou revealed that this connection was nothing new, an issue I will discuss in the next chapter. Vodouists need to make a living but this does not mean their practices are no longer valid. Therefore, I realized that I needed to rethink my original plans for my research.

My original intent had to be to study a group that had been raised in Vodou in New Orleans for a number of generations but unfortunately I discovered that these participants are forbidden to discuss their religion in detail and do not have group ceremonies. Perhaps if I had years to conduct my ethnographic work I might be able to eventually gain their trust and permission but even then I would ethically not be able to discuss many aspects of their religion. Brenda Marie Osbey was the only Vodouists raised in New Orleans who was willing to discuss her religion with me. This limited my options but after my initial disappointment, I realized there were still quite a lot of Vodou activities going on in New Orleans. Vodou shops and museums did cater to tourists but they were not the only ones who used them. Practitioners like Priestess Miriam and *Manbo* Sallie Ann may not have been raised as Vodouists and they may have been initiated and instructed outside of New Orleans, but they were still practicing Vodou. I decided to refocus my attention on these more accessible groups and public areas where Vodou practices were observable while using the information about more secret aspects only if given permission (See figure #1).



Figure 1 Locations of sites studied in New Orleans



I interviewed, observed and researched as much as I could about current Vodou practices going on in New Orleans. Manbo Sallie Ann invited me to attend her rituals, and this contact became invaluable for meeting other Vodou practitioners. Therefore, I focused my attention on the practices going on at Sallie Ann's *peristyle* (temple) and attended ten ceremonies during my summer of ethnographic work. The *peristyle* is located in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans, which is part of the Ninth Ward (See figure #1). Ceremonies took place every Saturday night around 7:00 P.M. though occasionally ceremonies were cancelled or scheduled for another day or time. Monthly the *Ounfo* conducted public ceremonies outside of the *peristyle* as part of their efforts to help New Orleans heal after Hurricane Katrina. Ceremonies typically lasted until around 9:00 P.M. though at times they were shorter or longer. My husband attended the rituals with me out of support and because he was worried about me driving to and back from Baton Rouge to New Orleans (an hour and a half trip each way) alone at night.

My approach to these ceremonies was to conduct participant observation. Sometimes I sat back and took notes and photographs but most of the time I participated as much as possible in the ceremonies. *Manbo* Sallie Ann appreciated it when I took part in the rituals because she likes to have everyone there offer up their energy to the *lwas* (spirits). I enjoyed participating because I found the ceremonies exciting and because it gave me a unique perspective that simply observing could not. At every ceremony, I brought offerings to the *lwas*, danced, prayed and shouted "*Ayibobo!*" (Amen) when appropriate during the call and response. I also participated in other aspects of the rituals whenever I could. After the ceremonies were over the participants usually remained for a while chatting and talking about plans for the next week. I tried to stay for these informal meetings as often as I could. At times,

I simply listened to the issues the *Ounfo* discussed and at other times, I engaged participants in conversation. These informal meetings gave me an insight into the *Ounfo's* community, problems and issues and organization. When I did not take notes during the ceremony or conversations, I wrote them up as soon as it was possible.

Though *Manbo Sallie Ann* had already told the *Ounfo* that an anthropologist was coming, after the first ceremony I attended at the *peristyle Manbo Sallie Ann* asked me to explain to everyone who I was and what research I was doing. This gave me an opportunity to ensure everyone was fully aware of how my research would be used and gauge their reactions. This initial introduction and later discussions with practitioners revealed that a bias still exists against Vodou today. One of the women said that her own mother still thought that Vodouists kill and eat children. Based on these statements and other such prejudices I came to encounter I decided to avoid using the real names of participants unless they were public figures such as *Manbo Sallie Ann*. For the most part, I will only describe the participants as much as necessary for the point to be made and I will use pseudonyms. I have chosen photographs that do not reveal the identities of anyone other than public figures and myself. Though none of the participants asked me to hide their identity, I feel that ethically it would not be right considering my research will be available to the public.

### **The City That Care Forgot**

To understand Vodou's complicated place in modern New Orleans it is important to place it in the context of history and the multiple cultures that have influenced and continue to influence the practices. New Orleans is unique in many ways, due in part to the numerous cultural groups that have controlled and influenced the city. France claimed the Louisiana

Territory in 1682, which at that time extended from Mississippi to Canada, the Rockies to the Gulf Coast to Texas. Louis XIV of France sent The Company of the Indies (also called the Company of the West) to explore the tract of land. They in turn hired Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur de Iberville and his brother Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville to explore the land in 1718. These explorers established the city of *La Nouvelle Orleans* as the capital of this new French colony (See figure #2). In 1721, plans were made to lay the city out in an orderly grid fashion with what are now called St. Louis Cathedral and Jackson Square as the center and most prominent features of the town (Long 2006).



Figure 2 Map of Louisiana showing location of New Orleans.  
Drawing done by Jane Thomas and used with permission.

The rampant disease, frequent flooding, insects, and food shortages made the city unappealing to the Company of the Indies and it was soon turned back over to the French Crown. The French colonials sent for enslaved Africans and the Company of the Indies delivered twenty-three shiploads full. These men and women came from West Africa, mostly the Senegambia regions and some from the Fon and Yoruba areas. One trade ship contained central Africans, thus bringing the total number of enslaved and transported to Louisiana during this time to 5,951. (Long 2006).

By 1723, Catholic missionaries began arriving and by 1730, the Ursuline nuns had a specially trained group aimed at proselytizing to house enslaved. The *Code Noir* of 1724 required that all slave owners baptize and instruct their enslaved populations in Roman Catholicism. Many plantations went through the motions but as long as their enslaved acted sufficiently Catholic in public, they could practice the religion of their homelands in private. Vodou was born into this environment. The Catholic tradition of saints allowed the enslaved to associate certain shared traits between saints and West African spirits. This provided a way for them to publicly worship their traditional deities through the medium of the Catholic saints. After generations, Catholicism was no longer just a façade but rather the two traditions had blended to create a unique religious practice. European folk traditions brought by the colonizers were also incorporated into the religion. In Cuba, this developed into *Santería*, in Brazil *Umbanda* and in New Orleans and Haiti; it became Vodou (Fandrich 2007).

The French soon came to realize that Louisiana was not nearly as profitable as their other colonies and in 1763 turned Louisiana over to the Spanish as compensation for taking Florida from them after the Seven Years War. The Spanish left their mark in the architecture of

the French Quarter, which they rebuilt after a devastating fire, and in their lax attitudes towards the enslaved. The *Codigo Negro* (Black Code) provided many more opportunities for enslaved to be freed, allowed them to own property and goods and eventually buy their own freedom. These relaxed attitudes extended to romantic relationships that while technically illegal under Spanish law, became quite common. White men frequently had long-term relationships (called *placage*) with freed women of color to whom they often gave property and living allowance, while providing for the education of the children that resulted. These relationships and their resulting offspring further strengthened the connections between Catholic European beliefs and West African religious concepts. It also created a new caste of people that were free and while not white, they were not quite African either (Long 2006).

In 1800, Napoleon Bonaparte secretly negotiated to have the Louisiana territory returned to French power but after the defeat of his troops, Napoleon sold the land to the United States for \$15,000,000. Americans from all over flocked to this new territory, with some choosing to settle in New Orleans. However, despite attempts by President Jefferson to Americanize Louisiana, the territory clung to its Roman Catholic and civil law roots. In 1772, Spanish friars had replaced the French clergymen and Pere Antoine had become the priest at St. Louis Cathedral. Antoine was sympathetic to the enslaved who still practiced the religions of West Africa and presided over the Catholic rites of many practitioners including the famous and to some infamous Vodou Queen Marie Laveau. The history of her life intertwined with the myths and stories that surround her but there is no doubt that she was highly influential in New Orleans (Long 2006).

Scholars are unsure when Marie Laveau was born but records at St. Louis Cathedral kept track of important events in her life. In 1819, she was married to Jacques Paris and later her children were all baptized there. She became a hairdresser and through her clients heard the gossip of the rich. She used this as leverage in her rise to power as a Vodou Queen, an honorary title for Vodou religious leaders in New Orleans. Local tabloids discovered Marie Laveau to be a fascinating character and competed with one another to break one sensational story after the next. Many of these newspaper stories are highly embellished and perhaps made up but police records do indicate that women and men of color and a few white women were routinely arrested and reprimanded for practicing the religion. According to records uncovered by Ina Fandrich, Marie Laveau died during the Civil War but in her place her daughters and imposters stepped up to take over her reign. This led to stories that she was immortal or at least much longer-lived than normal human beings (Fandrich 2007).

Marie Laveau brought the public's attention to the Vodou practices going on in the city but she was not the first to practice the religion by any means. Ina Fandrich points out instances of slave owners recording Vodou activities (though they do not call them as such) and writing about how to deal with this. She argues that, "contrary to this widespread assumption, recent findings indicate that these two religious counterculture traditions [in Haiti and New Orleans] developed independently from one another during the eighteenth century as similar, yet distinctly different systems" (2005:38). However, the Haitians did come to Louisiana in large numbers and brought their religious systems with them. Though they may have found a preexisting Vodou religion, they possibly influenced and added to these practices with their own (Long2006).

In Haiti, Vodou has been violently punished in the past, but it has also served to bring the people together to fight and rally. Saint-Domingue (Haiti) was incredibly important to France financially and to the rest of Europe for the coffee, cotton, and sugar it provided. Conditions were harsh and often brutal but religion gave the enslaved comfort in a situation where they had no control (Deren 1953). It also provided a framework for important social connections and group empowerment necessary for a revolt. The Haitian revolution is often called the first successful slave revolt of modern times and on July 1, 1804, Haiti became an independent republic. However, the violence that ensued caused many enslaved, freed people of color and whites to flee to the New World (Peguero 1998). These African-Haitians brought their religious practices with them and influenced the already existing Vodou practices in New Orleans (Fandrich 2007). This first wave of Vodou immigrants would not be the last and later groups would manage to maintain their unique practices through the rituals, symbols and arts that continued to develop on the island (Dubois 2001).

Eventually the United States organized the vast Louisiana Territory into states, making Baton Rouge the capital of Louisiana. New Orleans still retained importance in the state but along with the rest of the parishes that made up Louisiana it became more and more Americanized. New Orleans still preserves some of its unique cultural elements, however, Vodou being one of them. These differences have become selling points for tourism and New Orleans has enjoyed a status as a popular tourist destination. However, issues of corruption, crime, and most recently, Hurricane Katrina have marred the economic and social development of the city.

In August of 2005, one of many warnings for hurricanes that threaten Louisiana each year was for Hurricane Katrina. Years of embellished hurricane threats and violent but survivable storms had hardened residents, making some unwilling to leave despite the mandatory evacuation. The Superdome was set up as a safe place for those who could not or did not leave in time. Others boarded their windows and prepared to wait out the storm in their own homes as in numerous hurricanes before. In August 29, 2005, Katrina hit New Orleans with a vengeance. What she did not rip up with 145 mph winds she deluged with rain. The final blow was when the structurally unsound levees broke, flooding many neighborhoods. A shocked nation watched as TV crews broadcast footage of a submerged city. Cars bobbed along next to boats, houses were barely visible under the brackish waters and survivors floated down streets in upturned refrigerators. Hospitals and nursing homes were left without power or running water. It was chaos (Moyer 2005, Brinkley 2007).

It took months before officials allowed residents to move back to what was left of their homes. Though much of the French Quarter remained above water, the city had expanded over the years to include the lower elevations of the land. The Ninth Ward was especially hard hit due to levee breaches and the below sea level of the ground which held the waters like a bowl within the surviving levees. It is estimated that about eighteen-hundred people lost their lives. Many people fled to other cities and even states where camps had been set up. For those whose homes were not destroyed their schools and workplaces often were. Some people waited it out before they could return home. Others made new lives in new cities (Moyer 2005, Brinkley 2007). Today the Ninth Ward is still being rebuilt but FEMA trailers are fewer and fewer and income-producing events such as Mardi Gras have been successful. Overall, the city has



come a long way in rebuilding from the devastation. However, housing is expensive and flooding damaged much of what is available. This has prevented many musicians and artists from returning, a fact often lamented by the media. However, many other people have been unable to return as well. Some of these were members of *Manbo Sallie Ann's peristyle*. Others were probably Vodouists who had been raised in the religion. This has hurt the city's Vodou practices in some ways but perhaps more interestingly these Vodouists unable to return home could spread their faith wherever they have resettled. Like their ancestors forced out of Africa, they too were forced to leave their homes and yet took their religion with them. Perhaps new centers of Vodou will spring up in Atlanta and Houston. On the other hand, perhaps they will assimilate and within a few generations, their practices will fade away.

## CHAPTER 4.

### THREE IN ONE: THE VODOU TRINITY

Throughout my research and interviews, I often encountered a division in the way that practitioners and outsiders alike viewed the types of Vodou going on in New Orleans today. Jerry Gandolfo, the owner of The Historic New Orleans Voodoo Museum, perhaps put it most clearly when he said there are three types of Vodou in New Orleans: tourist, traditional New Orleans and Haitian/other. This is not to say that any one form of Vodou is more authentic, traditional or “correct” than any other nor is it my own observation that these are distinct and separate groups. On the contrary, I argue that these categories overlap and merge into one another. However, there are differences in both actual practices and the ways in which practitioners identify themselves and these are important to explore in order to get a complete understanding of modern practices.

The first category, tourist Vodou, is the most obvious to anyone visiting New Orleans. Vodou has become one of the many tourist attractions of the city and the word adorns numerous shop signs, trinkets and activities. People who do not have any connection to the religious practice of Vodou started many of these, such as Jerry Gandolfo’s New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum. The second category is the Vodou practices that have developed from the days of slavery in New Orleans. This has sometimes been referred to as “traditional” in my interviews but again I want to point out that it is all both traditional and in a constant state of flux. However, the meaning behind this is that these groups of Vodouists come from generations of New Orleanians who were raised in the practice and have passed it down. One such practitioner is Brenda Marie Osbey. The last type is Vodou practiced by people and groups

who were not raised in the New Orleans Vodou religion but either come from outside the city with their own Vodou practices and/or were trained elsewhere such as *Manbo* Sallie Ann Glassman. It is this last group that I studied the most so I will dedicate an entire chapter on it.

### **Gris-Gris Bags and Vodou Dolls: Selling Vodou to the Masses**

Vodou in New Orleans, like much of the city's cultural heritage, has become a major commodity. Walking tours, guidebooks and numerous tourist shops have all found ways to promote and profit from New Orleans' Vodou history. For example, Randolph Delehanty writes in *Ultimate Guide to New Orleans*, "Voodoo is one of the things New Orleans is noted for, and there has long been a cottage industry here that caters to the curious" (1998:93). Another guidebook, *Frommer's New Orleans 2003*, notes that, "Voodoo's mystical presence is one of the most common motifs in New Orleans. The problem is that the presence is mostly reduced to a tourist gimmick. Every gift shop seems to have voodoo dolls for sale..." (Herczog, 2003:172). Indeed many tourist shops have Vodou related items for sale such as "Voodoo Dolls," *gris-gris* bags (charms) and ceramic figurines of coffins and skeletons.

However, tourist shops and guidebooks are eager to make the point that despite this commercial aspect there is still "real" Vodou in New Orleans. *Frommer's* goes on to explain, "But lost among the kitsch is a very real religion with a serious past and considerable cultural importance... It is estimated that today as much as 15% of the population of New Orleans practices voodoo" (Herczog, 2003:172-4). Presenting Vodou as a current and legitimate practice today makes the sale of related items and services more interesting and relevant. Keith Odom writes in his guidebook, "Voodoo is still widely practiced today. Like New Orleans' high water

table, it lies just below the topsoil of daily life” (1994:56). Odom then goes on recommend a Vodou walking tour with stops such as Congo Square and Marie Laveau’s grave.

Despite these clear uses of Vodou for commercial gain, the guidebooks are right in that Vodou people in the city still practice the religion and that tourists can get a glimpse of this by visiting certain shops and locales. Some practitioners, such as Brenda Marie Osbey, are uncomfortable with the extent to which Vodou has been commercialized. However, there has long been a connection between Vodou and making money that cannot be ignored. Even the famous Vodou Queen Marie Laveau made a living from practicing the religion. Just because a store or person profits from Vodou does not mean that it is no longer legitimate. Moreover, it is also significant to take into account the purchasers of Vodou items who, while they may not consider themselves Vodouists, are certainly practicing aspects of Vodou when they light the candles, carry around a *gris-gris* bag, or leave an offering at Marie Laveau’s tomb. In reality, the lines between practitioner and non-practitioner are blurred and make estimations about the number of Vodouists in the city nearly impossible. New Orleans has become a liminal space where the lines between secular and sacred have become blurred. Practitioners cater to tourists and tourists become practitioners. Religious space is found in the middle of retail shops and items available in any convenience store can become sacred offerings. These multilayered relationships mean that it can be hard to interpret symbols, performances and objects and this is why an in-depth look at commercial Vodou is necessary.

There different ways in which retailers use Vodou for moneymaking enterprises. First are the restaurants, organizations and stores that have appropriated the word “Voodoo” (and other Vodou related symbols and terms) in the names of their business or items they sell but

the relationship ends there. For example, a popular restaurant in New Orleans (and other Louisiana cities) is Voodoo BBQ & Grill. Their menu includes items like *Gris-gris* Greens, the Voodoo Burger and the Graveyard Platter alongside more common names for barbecue dishes. The restaurant menu and website, however, claim only to be authentic New Orleans style barbecue and have no mention of magic or religion. Another example is The New Orleans Voodoo, the city's arena football team. The arena the team plays in has been nicknamed "The Graveyard," the cheerleaders are called the "Voodoo Dolls" and the two team mascots are named "Mojo" and "Bones." *Mojo* is a word meaning a magic spell or charm though the mascot is a yellow and purple furry creature that wears a team jersey. Bones is a skeleton with a tuxedo jacket, a top hat and sunglasses – an image taken from Haitian Vodou spirit *Baron Samedi*. This image of *the Baron* also shows up in the team logo, which is a skull in a top hat with sunglasses. Yet the arena football team claims no relationship to the religion.



Figure 3 Voodoo Music Experience: Voodoo Stage. The band Fallout Boy is playing to a large crowd at this outdoor music festival. Photo taken on October 28, 2007 by author.

Perhaps the most well known example is the Voodoo Music Experience, a yearly music festival held in New Orleans. This music festival occurs over Halloween weekend and has featured such big name artists as The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Tool, Greenday, The Beastie Boys, 50 Cent, Nine Inch Nails, The Pixies, and Eminem. Though the festival refers to the stages as altars and has signs all around the grounds instructing participants to, “Worship the Music” (See figure #3), there appears to be no connection to any religion or magic. Like the other examples, the word “Voodoo” conjures up images of New Orleans magic and mystery that tantalize tourists and buyers and these businesses and organizations have simply capitalized on that.

Next are the shops that cater to the average tourist. These stores carry items such as novelty t-shirts, ceramic figurines, CDs of Cajun music, New Orleans guidebooks and a number of other things that someone visiting the city might potentially want to take home as a memento. Quite often, these stores have items that are related to Vodou or at least referred to it, the most common of which are “Voodoo dolls.” These are small dolls usually made from sticks tied in a cross shape to make a body with two arms sticking out. This shape is covered in a triangle of brightly colored cloth that is sometimes stuffed with Spanish moss to fill out the body. A head is usually made of black cloth or wood tied to the neck and often has eyes, a nose and a mouth painted on it. Feathers, sequins, and other items decorate the dolls. These elements can vary with some versions being much more elaborate than others, but they all appear to be handmade. They often come with a pin and instructions on how to use the doll in order to affect a particular person. These dolls are also sold in the open-air market, thrown at parades and can be found on the internet. Collections of spells, dolls, and kits are sold at many tourist shops (See figure #4).



Figure 4 Vodou dolls at a New Orleans tourist shop. Notice the other items such as tarot cards, kits and a souvenir coffin. Photo taken by author February 4, 2008.

According to Jerry Gandolfo, *Manbo Sallie Ann*, Vodou dolls are not part of the practice of Vodou despite their popularity in tourist shops. They told me that Vodou dolls are actually of a European origin and those that do make a likeness of a person for ritual use do so for positive, not negative, reasons. Researchers such as Wendel Craker (1997) have indeed documented the use of poppets (dolls) for ritual use in European witchcraft practices in America. In addition, while magical practices in some West African cultures such as the Yoruba do use human figures (Wolff 2000), in my own research I never encountered a person who claimed to be a Vodouist

who also used Vodou dolls. Regardless of their origins, the shops sell the dolls as souvenirs rather than religious objects in these shops. Their bright colors, unusual nature and relatively cheap price (most went for \$5.00-\$10.00 USD) make them an attractive memento.

The last type of “tourist Vodou,” and the most interesting in relation to modern practices, is the shops and museum that purport to be representations of “authentic” Vodou. These stores sell candles, incense, charms and other items for use in rituals and magic. Many of these stores are in the French Quarter, which is the area that most of the tourists visit. For example, Rev. Zombie’s Voodoo Shop is located on St. Peter Street across from the popular bar and restaurant Pat O’Briens. Another example is Marie Laveau’s House of Vodou located on the infamous Bourbon Street, which, like Rev. Zombie’s, has a “working” Vodou altar that patrons are forbidden to touch or photograph (See figure #5). Both have numerous candles and magical ritual ingredients that come with no instructions or explanations presenting the assumption that the patrons already know what to do with them. This attempts to present a view of the other to the tourist, as if they have stepped into a space where they could encounter mysterious Vodouists at any moment. Signs in the stores offer psychic readings and the shelves stock books on everything from Vodou to European witchcraft. Other stores such as Voodoo Authentica, Erzulie’s Authentic Voodoo and New Orleans Mystic offer similar services and goods. Many of them also offer ritual goods for Wiccans and Pagans in order to expand their clientele. These stores all have supplies used by practitioners as well as items in which the casual tourist might be interested. These shops create an interesting space in that they are for both tourists and practitioners. They are secular retail shops but at the same time, many contain sacred altars that turn the area into a religious space. The altars attract tourists who





Figure 5 Tourists at Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo during Mardi Gras 2008. The sign above the entrance reads, "Special Exhibit Strange Gods Strange Altars." Photo taken by author February 4, 2008.

want to see “real Vodou” but also lend an air of authenticity to draw in practitioners who might purchase the larger ticket items.

Another example of a secular space that also serves as a sacred one is the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum on Dumaine Street. I visited this museum on numerous occasions and interviewed the owner Jerry Gandolfo as well as Priestess Miriam and *Manbo* Sallie Ann who used to work there. The museum has a small retail space at the front and two rooms and a hallway that are filled with Vodou related artifacts, memorabilia, and informational signs. In one of the rooms is an altar that the Gandolfo brothers built as a demonstration of a typical New Orleans Vodou altar. Over the years, according to the owner Jerry Gandolfo, the altar has grown not because the owners have added anything but because visitors bring candles, statues, notes and other offerings. The space was created to represent the owners’ idea of what a Vodou altar should be in order to attract tourists. Interestingly, if this is true, the visitors have appropriated it as a legitimate religious space and have remodeled it to fit their own conceptions of what a Vodou altar should entail. It is for this reason that the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum is a wonderful example of how in New Orleans the line between tourism and religion is often blurred and is worth a more in depth look.

The Voodoo Museum is about a block away from Bourbon Street and a couple of stores down from Voodoo Authentica. The museum is a small establishment squeezed into a former residence made up of a front room and two rooms in the back with a hall to the right connecting all three. Walking in from the street, there is a reception desk across from the entrance under a large portrait of Marie Laveau. To the right of the door are t-shirts and books for sale and to the left are candles, potion ingredients, and other Vodou related souvenirs.

Across from the desk is a bench flanked by shelves displaying “authentic” Vodou Dolls and *Gris-gris* bags (charms to influence luck, health and magic) that are for sale. For five dollars, you get into the actual museum and a laminated sheet explaining each room.

The entrance to the exhibition rooms is to the right of the reception desk down two short steps and into a dark, musty and narrow hallway. The walls are covered in photos, documents, paintings, and masks. Halfway down the hall and to the left is the *Gris-gris* Room, which is also dim and filled to the brim with bones, paintings, fetish objects and displays. At the end of the hallway is the Altar Room, which is larger though still poorly lit. The right-hand wall is painted teal, the back and front walls are white and the left wall is covered in wood paneling. There is a window in the wooden wall looking into an empty cage where a late boa constrictor lived. Numerous small altars, photos, Haitian Vodou flags and paintings decorate the room. Along the teal wall is a wishing stump, which is a large piece of dark wood covered in rich carvings of faces and glimpses of body parts. Instructions on the side tell visitors how placing a slip of paper with a wish on it in the stump along with a money offering ensures that Marie Laveau will come to their aid.

At the far side of the Altar Room stands the main altar under a sign declaring it to be the “Humfo Altar” (See figure #6). According to Alfred Metraux, a *Humfo* is a sanctuary for the gods (1959). Underneath this sign is a table-like structure about three and a half feet tall covered in black, red, blue and silver fabrics. The appearance of the altar changes as new items are added and burnt candles are removed, but a description of the altar from April 7, 2007 reveals the many layers and symbolic offerings that are in the space. In the center stood the tallest statue, a Virgin Mary with snakes at her feet. Behind her was a piece of old wood with faded red stripes

and a star painted on it. There were eight other statues of varying heights that appeared to be made out of porcelain on the altar. There was also a black and red doll made out of tightly wound yarn. Scattered around the altar were five tall Saint Candles. One was blue with no picture, one was pink for Santa Barbara and another was green for Nuestra Señora Del Carmen. There was also a white candle for the Virgen de Guadalupe and another that did not have a picture and had burned down too low to determine the color. Two wine bottles were on the altar, one on either side. The corks had been removed and the multi-colored trickles of wax that had run down the sides indicated that numerous candles must have been lit there. Mixed in-between the candles and statues were numerous offerings. There was a wooden cross with three wooden balls hanging from it, a pack of sugar, an egg, a small bottle of Malibu Rum and numerous photos and hand written notes. Behind the altar, someone had pinned a square of shiny red cloth on which hundreds of photos, notes, IDs, business cards, and the like had been placed. In front of the altar was a short chair with a scarlet cushion. A black cloth designed with a cross, fleur-de-lis and a snake wound around a lightning bolt had been draped across the chair's high back. A well-worn bible was on the chair's cushion.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important aspects of the practice of Haitian Vodou is the Mysteries or *lwas* (spirits) who must be honored and fed. The *lwas* and the practitioners share a symbiotic relationship; meaning that the *lwas* must be fed and maintained by the living and in return the *lwas* give blessings and assistance to the faithful (Sallie Ann Glassman 2000:17). In order to feed them a sacrifice must be offered for the spirit to consume. Despite Hollywood's portrayal of this act in movies such as the 1973 James Bond film "Live and Let Die" and the 1988 horror film "The Serpent and the Rainbow," ceremonies do not



Figure 6 Humfo Altar at the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum.  
Photo taken by author April 7, 2007.

necessarily entail bloodshed (though killing an animal such as a chicken can be appropriate depending on the *lwa* and the ritual). Candles, alcohol, flowers and other items that the *lwa* prefers are common offerings especially for daily maintenance of the relationship between practitioner and spirit. In addition to placing offerings on the altar practitioners also maintain the space by periodically cleaning out the area of burnt out candles and old food and rearrange the space to be aesthetically pleasing (Glassman 2000, Metraux 1959). Gerry Gandolfo said that practitioners typically do not use the altar in the presence of tourists, and numerous trips to the museum without encountering worshippers confirm this. However, evidence of such maintenance and offerings could be seen when photographs were compared. For example, between March 24, 2007 and April 7, 2007, a photograph and an event pass were added to the altar but two Saint Candles were removed.

This leads to the interesting question of who was making offerings and maintaining the altar. Jerry Gandolfo suggested that visitors used his altar because they did not have one of their own. It is understandable that many practitioners might not have an altar in their own home due to negative stereotypes visitors and family members might associate with seeing such a space. Smaller living spaces such as apartments might also limit the space a practitioner has for an altar. The members of *Manbo Sallie Ann's Ounfo* have a small altar for their ancestors and *mete tete* (a person's guardian *lwa*) but visit the *peristyle* when they need to make offerings to other spirits. For those that do not openly belong to a group that has a shared altar, however, they must find another place and way to make their offerings. The syncretic nature of Vodou meant that in the past practitioners could worship the *lwas* through the medium of saint statues and candles at the Catholic Church. Images of the saints are still

commonly used in the worship and representation of the *lwas*. Quite often, instructions were given that an appropriate offering would be a statue, candle, or saint card that corresponded with the *lwa* for which a particular ritual was being held.

Members of The Religion (those who grew up in the Vodou faith in New Orleans) do not honor the same spirits as Haitian Vodouists but they do have altars for ancestor spirits.

According to Brenda Marie Osbey, The Faithful often put photographs and objects belonging to the dead on the altar and one altar can serve many spirits. Mrs. Osbey also says that altars can be set up to protect the living when they are away. Some people raised in The Religion may no longer feel comfortable having an altar in their own home, but instead use the altar at the museum to honor their ancestors. As long as the museum remains open, the altar will be maintained and will provide a safe place for believers to pay their respects to the dead.

It is important to note two things before continuing. First, Jerry Gandolfo said that he does not change the altar in any way. He allows some Vodouists whom he knows into the museum at no charge so that they might practice their religion while others pay the entrance fee and sneak items in without Jerry's knowledge. However, being the owner of the establishment, he serves to gain by having the reputation of maintaining a working Vodou altar that visitors can view and even use. This is not to suggest that this is not true, but merely pointing out that this is a commercial enterprise for him just as the altars at the Vodou shops provide a way to attract tourists. In addition, despite his claims that these practices go on without his knowledge, his discussion of it and the items left behind mean that he is aware of these activities even if he does not see them. Second, probably not everyone who places items on the altar would consider themselves Vodouists. Like the wishing stump to the side of the

altar, there are no prohibitions against visitors using it and there is likely some attraction to leaving an item or request. For some, leaving an offering may be like throwing a penny into a wishing well. For Catholics, the saints' candles and statues of saints and the Virgin Mary may be familiar enough that they feel comfortable praying and worshipping at the altar. Regardless of the reasons, it is perhaps fitting that the multitude of ethnicities, religious backgrounds and nationalities that visit the museum (as suggested by the photographs and multi-lingual notes left behind) make up the people who leave offerings at the altar. Vodou is a religion of syncretism; it is a combination of African religious systems, the Catholicism that the enslaved Africans were forced to adopt and, some argue, even Native American practices. Much of the reason it has been able to survive numerous persecutions is because of its ability to absorb and adapt. As Sallie Ann Glassman Says, "Vodou is tolerant. It receives...It tells us that we are precious, whoever we are, Jew, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, white or black" (2000:3). With such an open and accepting attitude, it should not be surprising that people feel moved and comfortable leaving behind offerings at an altar that is not their own. However, just because a visitor was not raised in the Vodou tradition and/or does not consider themselves practitioners, that does not rule out their activities as part of Vodou practices in New Orleans. It may be important to distinguish them from practitioners who do associate themselves with the religion, but whether someone is using an item such as a *gris-gris* bag purchased from a tourist shop or leaving offerings or requests at a public altar, they are still adding to the ongoing Vodou activities in the city.

However, there is evidence that some of the people leaving items at the altar are also at least somewhat knowledgeable about traditional Vodou *lwás* and offerings and that multiple



visits are made. For example, some of the notes pinned behind the altar convey thanks for assistance, healing, and other matters, suggesting that not only had a request been made to the spirits represented on the altar but that the note writers felt their desires had been answered. In addition, certain offerings on the altar and next to it relate to specific *lwas* that the average tourist would probably not be aware of (See figure #7). For example, there were quite a lot of cigars, which are common offerings for *Legba* and *Ogou*. The crosses may also be for *Legba*, as he is the guardian of the crossroads. *Ezili Freda* is often represented by images of the Virgin Mary seen in the statues on the altar and is probably the intended recipient of the Virgin Mary candles. The egg may be for *Danballah* and *Ayida Wedo* or their child *Zetwal* who is often depicted inside the egg. The bottles of rum may be for a number of different *lwas*, as alcohol is an appropriate offering for many of the spirits. These are all items that a tourist is unlikely to carry with them on a trip to a museum and, therefore, point to a practitioner familiar with Vodou who has planned to bring an offering with them.

These examples of how tourism and Vodou have played off one another, blurring distinctions with each growing and adding to one another, create an interesting and dynamic space. The museum is both a public and a private space at the same time. Technically, Jerry Gandolfo owns it and he has the right to do with it as he pleases. It is a commercial enterprise set up primarily for tourists. It costs five dollars to get in and it closes at five o'clock every day. However, it is open to the public for education and commercial purposes. Though the museum was originally created as a space to look at and not touch it has, without consulting the owner, become a sacred space that the public both creates and maintains. It is not often that a



Figure 7 Close up of altar at museum. Photo taken by author April 7, 2007.

museum's problem is visitors bringing things *in* rather than out, but this is the very issue that the Gandolfo brothers faced in the early years of the museum. Suddenly, their carefully planned private enterprise was becoming a public space. With no discussion or permission of the owners, the public had appropriated this private museum display as their own public religious space.

Jerry Gandolfo was business savvy enough to recognize that this was a mutual benefit for his museum and allowed the activities to continue. Like the Vodou shops, he gained from having a "working" altar. The museum is too small for traveling exhibitions or rotating displays but if Vodouists bring in items, there is always something new for visitors to return and see, and it provides new Vodou items without the museum having to purchase them. For Vodouists, it offers a safe space to practice their religion. It is also, perhaps, a place to proclaim their presence in a city where it can often seem the only Vodou left is in tourist shops. Even the name of the museum, The New Orleans Historical Voodoo Museum, suggests the practice is a thing of the past. However, the continued use and changing of the altar provides evidence to visitors that Vodou is still alive and well, even if they do not get the opportunity to speak to practitioners personally.

These "tourist" Vodou spaces are not limited to commercial venues. Guidebooks and tours weave paths through New Orleans using history, folklore, and urban legends to create a space filled with the supernatural and mystical. Some of these locales are unknown to the interviewed practitioners, but others are considered spaces set apart from the normal, secular world. Two examples are Congo Square and the gravesite of Marie Laveau, both spots that guidebooks like *Frommer's* and *Only in Louisiana* suggest visiting on one's own or on a guided

tour (2003, 1994). *Manbo* Sallie Ann holds rituals at these sites and other research reveals that her group is not the only one. For example, Steve Pile records how Priestess Miriam holds midnight ceremonies at Congo Square every Halloween (2005). However, when religious groups are not using the location it seems to lie vacant. The area is now a lovely park, complete with historical markers and benches, officially dedicated to the musician Louis Armstrong. However, it lies behind a wrought iron gate that, in all my visits, was never open to the public. The second location, the tomb of Marie Laveau, is one that not only *Manbo* Sallie Ann has told me holds a special place, but one that is accessible.

Marie Laveau is supposedly buried in her husband's family crypt in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1. The Louisiana Writer's Project does record some discrepancies in the public opinion about this with some interviewees even suggesting she was buried in St. Louis No. 2 (Long 2006). However, all of the guidebooks suggest that she is buried in the Glapion family tomb and there are quite a lot of activities going on at this site. (Part of the reason the alternate site is not as popular may be due to the fact that St. Louis No. 2 is next to a housing project with a reputation for violence). Despite signs warning that visitors will be punished and fined if they "desecrate" or mark on tombs, it is common knowledge for locals (and quickly told to tourists) that, if three Xs are drawn on the tomb and the petitioner knocks three times, Marie Laveau will hear their pleas and give assistance. Pieces of soft red bricks taken from nearby tombs are common writing tools, but have led to preservation problems. Perhaps this is the reason that Xs can also be found drawn in lipstick, paint, ballpoint pen, and other mediums. Offerings are also commonly found at the grave such as pennies, flowers, jewelry, and personal items (See figure #8).



Figure 8 Grave of Marie Laveau in St. Louis No. 1. Notice the Xs and offerings.  
Photo taken by author August 8, 2007.

Marie Laveau's grave provides different meanings for different visitors but, for most, it is a location imbued with mystery and power. Some of the participants in guided tours that I have joined are unaware of who Marie Laveau was until the guide explained her significance in New Orleans history. Others have read about her in guidebooks and history books or have heard about her through other means. In this case, they bring preformed ideas about the site and what it means. Tourists and locals also visit the grave on their own, providing more privacy for any desired rituals or offerings. Visitors who do not identify with Vodou may find the

gravesite interesting and exciting due to the legends that surround Marie Laveau. Vodouists can connect to the space as a doorway to the spirit world through which they can contact the Vodou Queen. Through this portal offerings and assistance may be made.

Folklorists often use the term 'legend tripping' for "travelling to a specific location attached to a legend in the hopes of witnessing some kind of phenomena as if in the legend itself" (Mikel Koven 2007:186). As Mikel Koven goes on to point out, these visits add "to the narrative core attached to the location, by engaging and replicating the legend itself" (2007:186). Through acting out a ritual offering and petition, the visitors can become part of the legend instead of just hearing about it. This interaction personalizes events and creates a connection to the space. In December 2007, I took offerings on a visit to her gravesite with my mother and sister. They listened carefully to how they were to petition Marie Laveau and dutifully placed items ritualistically at the base of the grave. Later, I asked them about their experiences and, while neither felt anything supernatural or otherworldly, they described it as fun and something my sister could talk about to her friends back in Cincinnati. On guided tours in which I have participated, visitors often left behind pennies and small items from purses or pockets; but, tour guides forbade anyone to mark the grave. In both of these cases, participants were able to interact with the legend for the entertainment and experience it provides. Visitors can later tell friends that they not only visited the grave of Marie Laveau but they dared to engage with Vodou by leaving offerings or praying at her site.

Vodouists have a slightly different experience, though the legend of Marie Laveau surely influences them as well. In Vodou, there is a direct connection to the spirit world that allows practitioners to contact the dead. Ancestors and *lwas* alike are provided for through altars,

offerings, and the rituals that create the portals connecting the two realms (Glassman 2000, Metraux 1959, interviews by author). Cemeteries are sacred since that is where the dead are laid to rest (Harvey 2006). However, a graveyard is more than just hallowed ground. It is an in-between space, one that is created for both the living and the dead. Moreover, in our society where death is so far removed from everyday life, it is often the only place the living and the dead meet. Since it is here the living inter the dead, it is the logical place to contact the spirits of the deceased. Offerings made here are placed on a space that connects the remains of the dead and their spirits. Trips to the grave throughout 2007 revealed numerous items that had been placed on and in front of Marie Laveau's grave. Despite the cemetery's efforts to periodically clean off the Xs that adorn the grave, new ones always appear. As mentioned earlier, some of these are the result of tourists and legend trippers. However, items such as flowers, candles, and tampons speak of practitioners who came prepared and are familiar with acceptable and appropriate offerings given the nature of her spirit and their request.

It would be tempting to create dividing lines between tourist, New Orleans, and Haitian Vodou, but the reality is that these concepts and spaces blur distinctions between the three. All of these "tourist" shops, museums, and locations are created for or advertised to sightseers. However, to categorize them as merely commercial venues ignores their importance to numerous groups in New Orleans. Sacred space here is a fluid concept. It can exist in commercial and public areas just as easily as it does in private or separated space. In the rest of this thesis, I will show further how these places and concepts merge and intermingle with the other two categories, creating a city where tourist, New Orleanian, and outsider all come together in the experience of shared sacred spaces.

### **Members of The Faith: “Traditional” New Orleans Vodouists**

Enslaved people from West Africa brought their religion to New Orleans just as the enslaved brought their faith to Haiti. In New Orleans, Catholicism influenced their beliefs and, while retaining many original aspects, the people developed their religion into a unique New Orleans faith. For generations, descendants of these enslaved Africans have practiced Vodou despite persecutions and prejudice. Today, Vodouists raised in the tradition do not speak openly about their faith, and this creates difficulties for anyone wishing to study it. A family friend who was involved with Vodou as a child, and whose sister was quite active in the religion before her death, told me that it would bring bad things upon both of us if she spoke to me about the faith. This sentiment was echoed among many of the people I encountered. I found only one member of the religion, Brenda Marie Osbey, who was willing to openly discuss her beliefs and, even then, she could not reveal certain aspects of Vodou. I was able to speak to other people in New Orleans, such as Jerry Gandolfo, who have researched New Orleans Vodou, but it is possible they are mistaken about certain elements since they do not practice themselves. Due to these restrictions, I have had to base most of my findings on my interview with Brenda Marie Osbey on March 5, 2008.

Brenda Marie Osbey has been the poet laureate for Louisiana since 2005 and currently teaches at Louisiana State University in the English department. She was born and raised in New Orleans and still lives there to this day. Like her mother and grandmother before her, she is a Vodouist. However, while members of her religion recognize their beliefs as being Vodou, they do not call it by that name due to the negative connotations associated with the word. Rather, “We call it either ‘The Religion’ or we call ourselves the ‘Community of the Faithful’”



(Interview with Osbey 03/05/08). She disapproves of the use of “practitioner” because it tends to only be used for members of religions deemed as “other,” while someone practicing a Western religion, such as Catholicism, is merely called a Catholic (or whatever domination applies). In order to be sensitive to these concerns over terminology, I have chosen to refer to members of this group as ‘The Faithful’ and the beliefs as ‘The Religion.’

The Faithful trace their religion back to the Kongo of Africa and claim no connection to Haitian Vodou practices that stem from mainly Yoruba traditions. For Brenda Marie Osbey, there are a number of distinctions between the two religions. “There is absolutely no relation between Haitian Vodou and the religion in New Orleans... They have entirely separate beliefs” (Osbey 03/05/08). The first of these differences is that, in Haitian Vodou, the Catholic saints have become associated with specific divine spirits so that, today, they are thought of as one and the same. St. Michael is the warrior spirit *Ogou*, and an offering made to an image of the saint is to the *lwa*. However, in The Religion, the saints are intermediaries between ancestral spirits rather than the spirits themselves. “The hierarchy is the living and, among the living, the highest respected are the elderly ... because they are closer to the dead and, then, the dead of course are the ones who really matter; and, among the dead, the most valued people are the ones we revere as ancestors. The Catholic saints function as servants to the ancestors, in order for me to communicate to the ancestors, I might pray to a saint who are intercessors” (Osbey 03/05/08). Saints, such as St. Anthony, are not ancestor spirits but they can contact these spirits for the living.

The second difference is that there are no male priests or religious leaders. “All power resides in the woman and we call her mother” (Osbey 03/05/08). In Haitian Vodou, there are

*Oungans*, which are male priests, and they hold the same status as the priestesses, the *Manbos*. In New Orleans, the Faithful only recognize women as appropriate spiritual powers. These women leaders are called 'mothers' and have the power to heal. Brenda Marie Osbey said that when she was researching the subject herself she asked a number of the mothers why men cannot hold power. "What came up over and over again was that it was a matter of cleanliness and the belief that men were not clean and they can't be fully cleansed because women are naturally cleansed... But that women belong to - there is probably no other way to say it - they belong to a higher category of being." In addition, unlike in Haitian Vodou, the mothers are only called upon when a person needs assistance or healing. The mothers can accept gifts for their services, but they never ask for money. In Haiti, it is quite common to pay an *Oungan* or *Manbo* for services rendered.

Another way the two beliefs differ is that, in The Religion, practices are culturally circumscribed so there are no initiations for members. The Faithful are born into the religion, and either the father or mother must come from a lineage of members. In Haiti, there are initiations for different levels of commitment and these rituals can provide power for the initiates through the *lwas*. In The Religion, powers of a mother exist at birth or through an awakening brought on by an ancestor. The status of mother can skip generations, but an ancestor will reveal herself and, at a price, bestow the powers to the woman. "Usually, what happens is an ancestress appears to a woman in a vision or a dream and as a result of that the living woman is afflicted in some way" (Osbey 03/05/08). Her powers allow her to heal others but never herself. "And so, there is an element of sacrifice that that implies that one has to be willing to suffer in a certain way for the faith" (Osbey 03/05/08). This corresponds with what

Jerry Gandolfo told me in an interview on February 24, 2007. He said that, for a woman of The Religion to have powers, she must meet the following three criteria: she must have a female in her lineage that also had powers, she cannot ask for payment, and she must suffer in some way to balance out the great power she has been given. This could be blindness, a disease, a lame limb, or even an early death. In Haiti, the *lwa* may call upon a person to serve them and, if this person refuses, the *lwas* may cause them pain and suffering. However, once the calling of the spirits is accepted, the *lwas* remove this punishment and the person suffers no permanent damage.

One of the most interesting ways that Brenda Marie Osbey says the two beliefs are dissimilar is that, in The Religion, there is no group ritual. Unless a person needs the mother to restore balance, The Faithful practice The Religion alone in their own homes. Haitian Vodou includes home altars for ancestors and *met tetes* (a person's guardian *lwa*), but group rituals are very important. When the *lwa* enters a person's body in Haitian Vodou, the horse (person who is mounted) cannot remember anything about the possession. Therefore, it is necessary to have other people present in order to gain from the advice and insight the *lwa* has spoken during the possession. However, in The Religion, the connection to the spirit world is made through altars and prayers to the saints, who then relay messages to the dead. Since the saints are intermediaries, it is not necessary to become possessed to contact the spirit plane and, therefore, no group ritual is needed.

This runs contrary to what Jerry Gandolfo said in his interview about his experience with The Religion. He claimed to have gained the trust of some of The Faithful, one of whom invited him to a secret ceremony that included a live snake to represent *Le Grande Zombie* and during

which members became possessed by the ancestor spirits. He said that the members of this group were Baptists and, therefore, could not practice The Religion at church the way that Catholics do since Catholics can contact the divine through the images of the saints. Therefore, to honor these spirits, it was necessary to have a separate ceremony. Since Brenda Marie Osbey cannot tell me about certain aspects of her faith, it is possible she is obligated to leave these facts out. However, if this were the case, it seems odd she would bring the subject up at all. Furthermore, while she did tell me that most of The Faithful are also Christians who attend church weekly, worship of the ancestors while attending a Catholic Church would not be possible since, in The Religion, the saints do not correspond to the spirits the way they do in Haiti. Perhaps, if his experience is true, Jerry Gandolfo encountered a Haitian inspired group of Vodouists or there are other practices in New Orleans of which Brenda Marie Osbey is unaware.

According to Brenda Marie Osbey, the focus of The Religion is on restoring balance and honoring one's ancestors and loved ones. The Faithful achieve balance through ritual cleansings and prayers. "There is the natural desire for healing and wholeness and restoration. And so, there is a great deal of cleansing that takes place – physical cleansing, spiritual cleansing, symbolic cleansing" (Osbey 03/05/08). During some visits to a mother, she will prohibit certain activities in order to facilitate this cleansing. Although The Faithful have everything necessary for restoring their balance within themselves, the Faithful can call upon a mother to heal or assist with difficult issues. A visit to the mother requires knowledge of a sacred language used only in interactions with her. "When one goes to see the mother, when one consults the mother... there is a coded language that one uses with her and you learn that from childhood. You learn how to speak to the mother because it all takes place in codes" (Osbey 03/05/08).

Only members of The Religion know this language, and this sets the interactions apart from secular experiences. The home of the mother is a place where The Faithful can access the divine powers given to her by the ancestors, and the language used transforms and orients the experience as sacred.

Altars for the dead, the ancestors, and the living that have moved away are usually built in elevated areas of the home or backyard. Altars require certain soils and offerings, such as indigo seeds, along with personal items belonging to loved ones. The ritual items turn the altar into a sacred portal to the spirit world and the personal items such as a pipe or necklace connect that space to the spirit of the dead. Numerous people and ancestors can be represented on one altar, though Brenda Marie Osbey currently has five separate ones in her home and has had more in the past. Each altar requires specific elements to be present but, other than that, the design and look of the altar is up to the creator's aesthetic ideals and the limits of the physical space. Each altar, however, is a sacred space that connects to the transcendent. This organizes the secular space around it so that The Faithful respect the altar as an area set apart from the rest of the home.

This reverence for the dead extends beyond altars in the home to spaces which Brenda Marie Osbey views as sacred grounds, such as graveyards and Congo Square (see figure #9). "I think of cemeteries as, literally, sacred spaces because of the way we think about the dead. And, we're taught to make the sign of the cross when you enter a cemetery because you're crossing into another territory... And, so the cross that we're making isn't the Catholic cross. It is the crossroads because we are at the crossroads of life and death" (Osbey 03/05/08). The cemetery is ground set apart from the everyday world. The living and the dead, The Faithful and

members of other faiths, share it. In this way, it is a liminal space allowing the paths of the spirits and the living to meet in a space that is neither part of our everyday world nor that of the spirits. “We have our place and the dead have their place and the cemetery is the symbolic place in between” (Osbey 03/05/08). These crossroads are a place to bring offerings to the dead on holidays and anniversaries of their death. Items such as flowers, rum, and food are left at the graves because, here, there is a direct connection to the spirits of the deceased.

This sacred ground extends beyond clearly demarcated areas, such as gravesites, churches, and altars. “I think there are sacred spaces all around us, and that’s why we make the altars because we are – it isn’t so much that we are creating a sacred space as we are recognizing the significance of sacred space in our everyday lives” (Osbey 03/05/08).

Generations of The Faithful have lived and died within New Orleans, imbuing the very ground with spirit. Members of The Religion recognize that this is not only their home but also that of the dead. “We live with our dead. Our cemeteries are in the heart of our downtown... more than that, we have the altars in our home that speak to their presence with us. We invoke their names all of the time” (Osbey 03/05/08). This is powerful for binding members to the space and infuses all aspects of the city with the mystery of the spirits. It is so influential that proper altars require the very earth of the city. “You keep a bit of soil on your altar. If you move away, you take that soil with you. In moments of desperation, some people eat that soil because it represents home; it represents the place, but it also represents the dead, the ancestors” (Osbey 03/05/08). Through ingesting a portion of this sacred space, The Faithful are filled with the revered power of the ancestors in order to heal and persevere.



Figure 9 Congo Square today. The park is beautiful, but inaccessible.  
Photo taken by author April 7, 2007.

Offerings The Faithful place on the graves reinforce this connection to the cemeteries. Members give rum and food to the ancestors on holidays, such as All Saints Day, and on anniversaries of the death of the individuals. These secular items become part of a sacred act that creates ties between the living and the departed. Altars in the house connect the homes of the living to the world of the dead. Likewise, the graves of the deceased connect the dwellings of the dead to the lives of the living. Offerings at both points pass through the spiritual portal to the afterlife. An altar in a private residence must be created and maintained, but a public graveyard is sacred due to the earthly remains of the ancestors and does not need an altar to create this pathway. The relationship between the living and the dead travels in both directions, with the living providing offerings and prayers to the ancestors who, in turn, give protection and guidance.

The Faithful can purchase items for rituals and altars from secular spaces. Brenda Marie Osbey says that she does not know anyone who purchases items for sacred spaces from specialty Vodou shops. She is able to purchase everything she needs from local grocery stores or churches that sell the items much cheaper. She also dislikes the commercialization of her religion and, so, prefers not to patronize the stores that profit off her faith. For her, these enterprises are offensive because they do not reflect the reality of her religion as she sees it. Starting with Marie Laveau, people have used Vodou to entice tourists and outsiders in order to make money. For this reason, she says that no one in the community respects Marie Laveau and, even those who claim to be her relatives do not have altars to her. In Brenda Marie Osbey's view, this commercialized version of Vodou has relayed many errors to the public about her religion that are now believed to be true. She states that researchers such as Zora



Neale Hurston were fooled by these con artists, and this is why none of their accounts of her religion matches up with what people believe and practice today. The commercial vendors attempt to unveil the secrets of Vodou for the masses to make a profit and, in doing so, they have pushed The Faithful further and further into secrecy, only crossing paths in sacred public spaces.

The need for maintaining purity and balance extends beyond the spirit and individual to the religious community. Emphasis on origins and intent of believers reveals the importance members such as Osbey place on maintaining firm boundaries between The Religion and outsiders. The only way to become part of the community is to be born into it. There are no written documents that outsiders can learn from. Rather, sacred knowledge is passed down from generation to generation and is protected from dissemination through orders of secrecy. This distances and protects The Religion from influences such as tourism and Haitian practices and reinforces the unique and special place the religion holds in the city. Members look down upon people who attempt to expand or open these boundaries. The fact that Marie Laveau, a woman who died during the Civil War, still generates such disapproval from members such as Osbey provides a cautionary tale for anyone within the community who might want to follow her example.

These exchanges reveal the many ways in which the sacred exists in both the home and public, in gravesites and churches, as well as the ground of the city. Yet, the sacred can also be created with the secular. The Faithful can purchase items from grocery stores that alone have no significance but, when combined with the correct elements and placed in a certain area, can create a connection to the transcendent. Though The Faithful have tried to avoid connections

with other forms of Vodou in the city, their paths and sacred spaces overlap creating a complex web of significance throughout New Orleans.

## CHAPTER 5.

### NEWCOMERS AND OUTSIDERS: HAITIAN VODOU IN NEW ORLEANS

Perhaps the most visible aspect of active Vodou practices going on in New Orleans is of Haitian influence. Since practitioners are allowed to talk about their religion and new members can even be initiated, it is the only way to be active in a group of faithful Vodouists for those not born into The Religion. This openness also provided a way for me to actively research and participate in Vodou practices. I did the majority of my research with *Manbo* Sallie Ann Glassman's *Ounfo*. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, the following information comes from participant observation at weekly Vodou ceremonies at the *peristyle*, informal interviews before and after ceremonies, a formal interview with *Manbo* Sallie Ann on August 8, 2007 and a book that *Manbo* Sallie Ann wrote in 2000 about Vodou. In her book, she describes a typical ceremony, some basic Vodou beliefs and ideas, as well as important *lwas* and how to petition them. I have found this book useful for both interpreting events at ceremonies but assisting me to come to ceremonies prepared with appropriate offerings and clothing.

I first contacted *Manbo* Sallie Ann Glassman after one of my professors, Dr. Helen Regis, suggested her as a potential contact. I found her email on her botanica's website and explained who I was and what research I wanted to conduct. She responded that I was welcome to attend and research her ceremonies and invited me to the next one on March 24, 2007, which was to be held at a local art gallery as part of her *ounfo's* monthly public ceremonies to help New Orleans and its residents heal after the devastation of hurricane Katrina. This gave me the opportunity to observe my first Vodou ceremony, although I found out later that it was a bit different from her usual rituals since it was a public ceremony conducted in front of many who

were unfamiliar with Vodou. However, it was valuable for establishing contacts and it allowed me to observe without participating in order to get an idea of how a ceremony typically progresses. I learned that ceremonies were typically held on Saturday nights around 7:00 PM and lasted until about 9:00 PM. *Manbo* Sallie Ann conducted them at a *peristyle* she built behind her house on Rosalie Alley. According to my interview with her, the location used to be a place where drug deals and violence were common but, once she built the *peristyle*, the criminals went elsewhere and it has remained safe ever since. Most of the ceremonies that I attended were at this location, though I did go to other public ceremonies. In order to understand the structure and the rituals that went on inside, I will describe the *peristyles*, and the basic steps of the ceremonies I attended.

To get to the *peristyle* it is necessary to park on Desire Street or one of the nearby roads and walk to Rosalie Alley. This is a dirt lane off North Rampart Street between Piety Street and Desire Street. The alley runs behind a number of homes and the *peristyle* is near the middle of the lane. Leading up to the structure is a length of wooden fence along the right side of the alley that has been painted with a mural with numerous depictions of the *Iwas Gede and The Baron* (See figure #10). The *peristyle* is a turquoise wooden structure with lilac doors. The entire building is about 30'x10'. It is built long and narrow like a shotgun house with the main entrance on the side and a door to a garden on the right side of the structure. It is this garden that the painted fence hides. If not for the mural and the note on the *peristyle* explaining it belongs to *Le Source Acienne Ounfo*, the structure would not be particularly interesting or unique from the outside. During the day, it sits unused with the doors closed and the alley empty and quiet.



Figure 10 Mural along alley leading to *peristyle*. Notice the *Gedes* and *veve*.

Inside the *peristyle*, however, the building is quite different from the traditional New Orleans home (See figure #11). The door from the alley opens up to the largest of the three rooms. The floors are grey concrete, the walls unpainted wood, and the ceiling open to the rafters. The walls are covered in sequined Haitian Vodou flags and paintings – the majority of which were painted by *Manbo Sallie Ann*. In the rafters hang three flags of Haiti, a neon jellyfish, and a bottle. Strings of party lights shaped like dragonflies have been hung on the walls and along the rafters. In the center of the main room is a concrete pillar that reaches up to the

beams of the ceiling. Painted a light blue, *Danballah* and *Ayido Wedo* - the married snake *lwas* - wind their way up the post. The base of the pillar is a raised cement cylinder with small nooks scooped out for candles. It is here that participants make their offerings to the *lwas* during ceremonies.



Figure 11. Interior of peristyle. Manbo Sallie Ann cleans up after a ceremony. Photo taken by author on June 9, 2007.

To the right is a small kitchen and bathroom and to the left is the altar room. A series of beige curtains separate the rooms but are open during ceremonies to maximize the space. The kitchen has a sink, oven, stovetop, and refrigerator. A naked bulb hangs in the kitchen but remains off during rituals. The door in the kitchen leads to the garden patio area. The bathroom is small but has a toilet, sink, and tub. The area is also used for storage. The four altars for various *lwás* are to the left of the pillar, covered in candles, offerings, statues, and rich fabrics. *Rada* and *Petro* are separated because these two groupings traditionally do not get along. The *Rada* and *Petro* are two distinctions between *lwás* that most likely correspond to different regions in Africa where they were originally honored. Alfred Metraux suggests that the name *Rada* comes from the Dahomey town of Arada and *Petro* from the historical and mythical figure of Don Pedro. Dahomean and Nigerian *lwás* are usually placed into the *Rada* group and other African *lwás* as well as newer Creole *lwás* are placed into the *Petro* grouping. The differences between the two groupings is in how they are honored at ceremonies. They traditionally are not compatible and, therefore, are not honored together (Metraux 1959). *Manbo* Sallie Ann separates these in her *peristyle* with *Petro* on the left and *Rada* on the right (See figure #13).

Viewed head on, the altar to the far left is for *Lasiren*, the mermaid *lwa* married to *Agwe*. Her altar is half of a light blue boat on top of a table covered in a dark blue cloth (See figure #12). A large mirror leans against the table and photographs of Maya Deren, candles, mirrors, seashells, flowers, and images of *Lasiren* decorate the altar. A handmade doll stands on the tabletop dressed in dark blue with a mirror for a head and flowers on her hands, neck, and feet. The *veve* for *Lasiren* adorns the doll's dress. A large painting of *Lasiren* as a mermaid hangs behind the altar. At the end of ceremonies, special items, such as handmade gifts, are put on

the altar. Here, Vodouists can also pray to her and make offerings even when the ceremony is for a different *Iwa*.



Figure 12 Altar for the mermaid *Iwa Lasiren*. Photo taken by author June 9, 2007.



The white altar is for the *Petro* spirits, and the majority of the offerings are for the spirit of love and beauty, *Ezili Freda* (See figure #13). She is a fair-skinned virgin who flirts and dances, enticing men and answering prayers of love. She is the Virgin Mary and all things feminine, a rich woman who loves to be doted upon (Glassman 2000). Three-tiered and draped in white satin, the altar holds bottles of sweet liquor, champagne, and perfume mingle with statues of the Virgin Mary, candles, mirrors, and other offerings. More offerings are on the floor in front of the altar, some on top of a little step that is covered in the draping of white satin. Here, there are candles and bottles of Bacardi rum for *Ogou*, along with candles for *Agwe* and a few other *lwes*. Behind the altar are paintings and *drapos* (sequined spirit flags made in Haiti) for *Ezili Freda*. Again, some offerings are moved from the pillar to this altar at the end of ceremonies and practitioners may use it at other times.

Continuing to the right is the altar for the Rada *lwes*, with its three tiers covered in red satin to correspond with the group's fiery nature (See figure #13). Here, *Ezili Danto's* image and offerings are the most common. She is *Ezili Freda's* sister, bitter enemy, and her opposite in many ways. *Ezili Danto* is a strong, beautiful peasant woman who is practical yet has a fiery temper. She is associated with *Mater Salvatoris* and the scar on her face is attributed to a fight she had with *Ezili Freda* (Glassman 2000). Images of *Mater Salvatoris*, candles, liquor, flowers, and a string of red lights adorn the altar. Offerings from other Rada rights are moved to here as well. *Drapos* and a painting bearing *Ezili Danto's* image hang behind the altar.

The last altar at the far right is occupied by *Gede*, the *lwa* of death and sexuality. The ruler of the dead and a trickster *lwa*, he is pictured as a skeleton usually dressed in fine clothing, such as a formal black coat, a top hat, and sunglasses missing a lens (Glassman 2000).



**Figure 13** Petro and Rada altars. Lasiren is to the left and Gede to the right of the photograph. Photo taken by author June 9, 2007.

His altar is a black cross, but the arms extend both to the side and in the front to express that the crossroads are three dimensional (See figure #14). White, purple, and black crosses, candles, coffins, and skeletons, along with pepper infused rum, cigars, and dapper hats adorn the altar. A *drapo* with an image of *Gede*, a painting of him, and a painting of a portion of the fence that runs alongside the *peristyles* decorate the wall behind the altar.

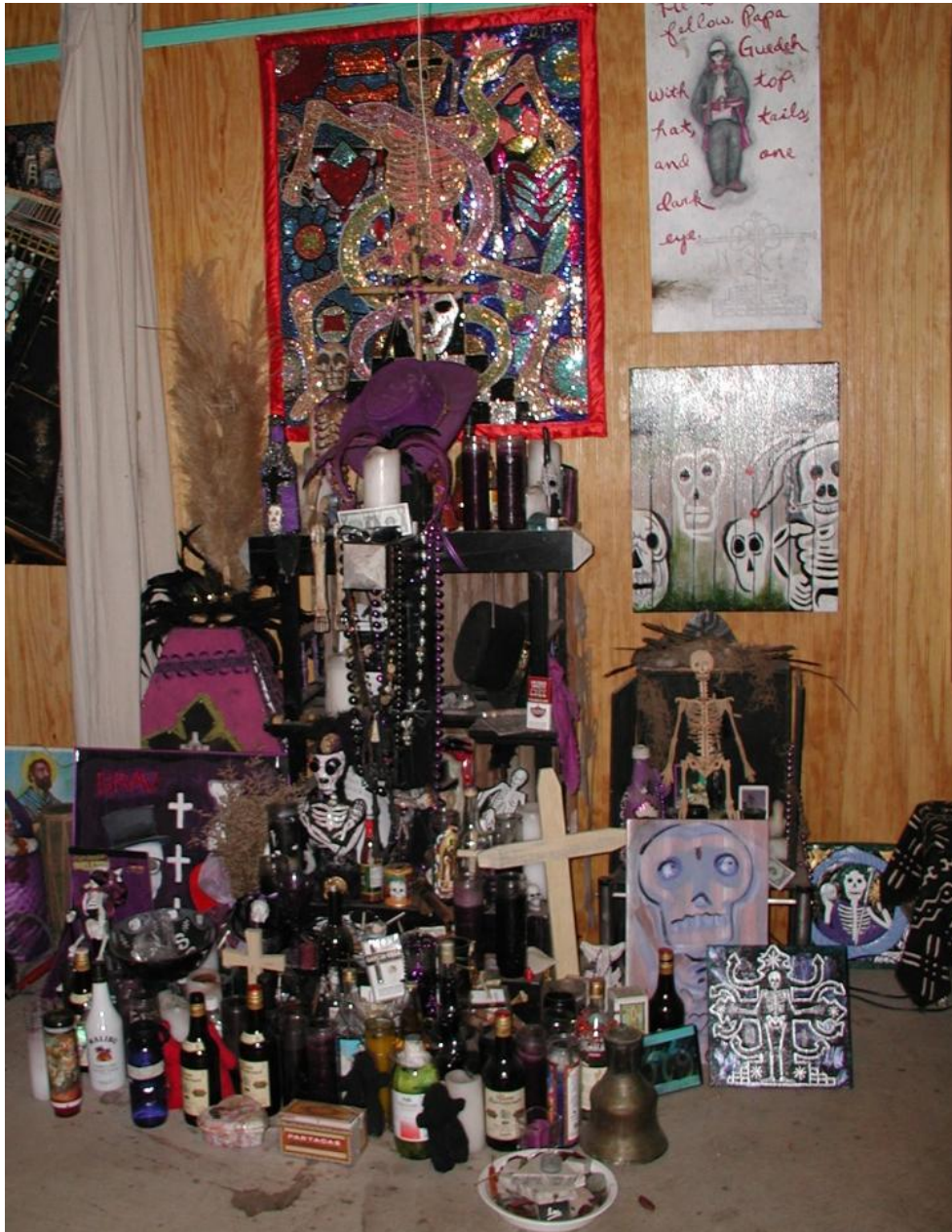


Figure 14 Altar for *Gede* at *peristyle*. Photo taken by author June 9, 2007.

Every week the *Ounfo* honors a different *Iwa* in the ceremony. *Manbo* Sallie Ann said that the decision as to which *Iwa* it should be depends on if there are any specific pressing needs of the community and, if not, which *Iwas* have not been honored recently. Participants are told in advance who the *Iwa* will be so that appropriate offerings can be purchased and to ensure that they arrive in the correct clothing. *Petro* rites usually require white clothing with a white head covering (such as a bandana) and *Rada* rites require white or red clothing with a red head covering. Typically, a ceremony begins at 7:00 p.m., but this time is often pushed back a little until everyone expected is present. The *peristyle* is large enough to hold about twenty-five people comfortably, though at times there have been more than that. Normally, when entering the *peristyles*, participants remove their shoes and place personal items along the wall and out of the way. The room is dim because the only electric lights allowed on are the strings of party lights. The rest of the lighting comes from candles placed around the room.

*Manbo* Sallie Ann often allows visitors to observe and participate in her ceremonies so, if there are new people, she usually spends a couple minutes explaining what is expected of them and how they should behave. The newcomers are encouraged to participate as much as they are comfortable because it adds to the positive energy of the ceremony. Unlike most Haitian ceremonies, there are no animal sacrifices because *Manbo* Sallie Ann is a vegetarian. Instead, she and the participants give up their own energy to feed the *Iwas*. Once this is established and everyone is in a circle around the central post, the ceremony begins. Each ceremony varies slightly depending on the *Iwa* that is honored. However, for purpose of illustration, below is a ceremony for *Lasiren*, which, up until the possession, was typical for a *Petro* ceremony at *Manbo* Sallie Ann's *peristyle*.

We arrive dressed in white at 7:00 p.m. We slip off our shoes and place our belongings against the *peristyle* wall. Walking on the cool concrete, we form a circle around the central post. A conch shell is blown, and the drummers begin to beat out a rhythm with their hands. Libations are poured at the entryways, the pillar, and in the four directions to form a cross while prayers are said in French. At each libation, they dribble a burning candle on to the floor and a member of the *Ounfo* places a lit white candle in the soft wax until the entire room is flickering. Then, one of the *Manbos* (a few of the *ounsi* have also been through the *Manbo* initiation besides Sallie Ann) takes the libations bottle and pours a little in everyone's hands. We rub the water on our hands, arms, faces, and feet to ritually cleanse and purify. Then, the *Laplas* (master of the ceremony) and two *drapo* carriers (who hold the flags) dance backwards in a circle to mark out the space for the ceremony. As they passed with the *drapos*, we kiss our hands and touch the decorative flagpole and, then, our hearts.

Then, the *Laplas* and the *Manbo* hold a ritual battle in the center of this designated circle. The *Laplas* aggressively cuts through the air with his machete to intimidate the *Manbo*. *Manbo* Sallie Ann charges back with her *asson* (a ritual calabash rattle) and this dance continues until, finally, the *Laplas* submits on his knees and the *Manbo* tenderly kisses the hilt of his sword. Roles established, all *Manbos* and *Oungans* (priests) present themselves to one another, ritually spinning three times – first counterclockwise, then clockwise and then counterclockwise. According the *Manbo* Sallie Ann, this “reorients perception to the way in which the *Iwa* see on the other side of the mirror” (2000:34). The religious leaders then perform a double handshake with one another before moving on to the *ounsi* (initiated). The *ounsi* present themselves to the *Manbos* and *Oungans* by pirouetting three times as well but

this time they hold hands above their heads. Double handshakes occur again, representing the crossroads (Glassman 2000, author's participant observation and interviews).

The *Manbos* and *Oungans* then make offerings to *Lasiren*. She is the *Iwa* of the ocean, a mermaid who is both beautiful and fierce. She adores mirrors, pearls, perfume, and seashells but abhors eating fish since she is part one. Together, the *Manbos* and *Oungans* present their offerings at each of the four directional corners where they perform three pirouettes. They walk to the central post and lovingly kiss the pillar and then the floor three times. With their offerings in hand, they make a cross in the air and pass the gifts through the center of the crossroads, letting the items leave their hands for a brief moment before catching them again so that the offerings might slip into the next world. Then, they place their offerings on the base of the post or nearby on the cement. As they do so, they bow their heads and offer prayers and request help in muffled voices meant only for *Lasiren*. In groups of three, the rest of us make our offerings and say our prayers.

Once all the offerings are in place, the group begins to sing songs in Creole French to *Legba*, the guardian of the crossroads, and *Manbo* Sallie Ann draws his *veve* in cornmeal on the cement (see figure#15). A *veve* is a symbol representing a specific *Iwa*, and it draws them to the ceremony. "In the course of Voodoo ceremonies, the reproduction of the astral forces represented by the *veves* obliges the *Iwas* (who are representations of the heavenly bodies, stars, and planets) to descend to earth" (Rigaud 1953:80). *Legba* is the first drawn because it is he who allows passage between this world and the spirit one. Once the *veve* is finished, and the song comes to a close, everyone kneels on the ground with their hands on the concrete. *Manbo* Sallie Ann and one of the other *Manbos* pour libations around the *veve* and say a prayer. She

sips liquor and sprays it from her mouth onto the *veve* to activate it. The *Manbo* lights a candle and places it by the *veve*. Everyone kisses the ground three times and then stands. This process repeats for the *Marassa* (the sacred twins and first ancestors), *Loko* (the first *Oungan*), and *Ayizan* (*Loko's* wife). *Loko* and *Ayizan* are related to *Legba* but are closer to human beings, and, therefore, act as intermediaries. Last of all, *Manbo* Sallie Ann draws a mermaid shaped *veve* for *Lasiren*.



Figure 15 *Manbo* Sallie Ann draws a *veve* for *Loko* at a ceremony in her *peristyle*. Photo taken by author July 21, 2007.

The *Manbos* then each take an *asson* and a bell and shake it up and down the back of each person in turn. This is to release their energy in order to feed the *lwas* and is in lieu of a blood sacrifice. Once each person has gone through, they are encouraged to dance in a circle counterclockwise around the central post. According to her book, *Manbo* Sallie Ann says it is permitted to step on the *veves* to disperse their energy but, here, participants avoid dancing on them. The drumming increases in volume and intensity as we dance around the central post in a circle. *Manbo* Sallie Ann scoops up some of the charged *veve* and uses it to mark a cross on the back of each person's neck. This is to encourage possession because that is where the *lwas* enter the horse (possessed person). As the drumming continues, the energy from the dancing pleases and entices the *lwa* to arrive.

With a shudder, *Lasiren* enters the body of one of the *ounsi*. He falls to the ground, his ankles pressed together and his feet spread outwards like fins. The other *ounsi* run over to attend to *Lasiren*, offering her some of the gifts that had been placed at the post. The possession does not last long, however, and the *ounsi* is soon left holding his head as he tries to recover. We continue to dance hoping *Lasiren* will return and, after a few minutes, *Manbo* Sallie Ann begins to sway and stumble. The *ounsi* sing songs to *Lasiren* and hold out their arms in case she too falls. With a tremble, she becomes possessed, with her legs pressed together in mock fins as she slides to the floor. The *ounsi* again offer *Lasiren* her gifts and, this time, she carefully examines them, pushing away the sushi in disgust and finally choosing a pearl necklace to wear. She blesses a few *ounsi* with alcohol and, after about ten minutes, she leaves the body of *Manbo* Sallie Ann only to take over the female drummer. The drummer convulses on the floor with her legs flopping like the tail on a fish out of water. Later, it is explained that she was



still new to possessions and unable to handle them as well. Finally, *Lasiren* leaves the *peristyle* and those who have been possessed are left exhausted but smiling. We all bend down for a final prayer and, at about 9:00 p.m., we stand up, the *ounsi* turn the lights on, and the ceremony is officially over.

It should be noted that normally the only *lwes* who should show up at a ceremony are the ones specifically invited through the ritual. However, *The Baron* and the *Gedes* are trickster *lwes* that love to show up uninvited and make crude comments to stir things up. For example, at the July 21, 2007, ceremony, *Gede* possessed one of the members of the *Ounfo* and proceeded to drink large amounts of rum and make sexual comments to the women. As we were all kneeling for the closing prayer he bent over in a member's face, let out a loud fart, and exclaimed, "That one had a nice cloud formation!" The ceremony had been a particularly serious one since it was dedicated to *Ezili Danto* and Our Lady of Prompt Succor in hopes of preventing another disastrous hurricane season. Despite this seemingly inappropriate comment and activity, everyone laughed (except the person who had received the gas in his face) and it lifted everyone's mood from the solemn topic at hand.

Once the lights are turned on, the cornmeal is swept up and the candles are put away. Visitors usually leave at this point, but members of the *ounfo* and regulars stick around to chitchat and discuss upcoming ceremonies and issues. These informal gatherings usually last about half an hour. However, I sometimes left before these gatherings were finished, so it was possible they went on longer. Topics ranged from discussing what the *lwa* said or did to movies recently seen or politics. Since the person who is possessed has no memory of the possession, this was the time to convey to the unaware person any words of wisdom or advice spoken by

the *lwa*. For example, after the ceremony for the warrior spirit *Ogou Achade* on June 9, 2007, the *ounsi* informed *Manbo* Sallie Ann of and discussed the possible meaning of the *lwa*'s cryptic advice that, "You did well this time. Time can be either a cathedral or a war zone. The will is fire, but the will is not what you think. Are you ready? They are coming. Do you think you can make time stop? Do you have enough time? You did well. It is good." For me, this was a wonderful opportunity to see how members of the *Ounfo* felt about aspects of the ceremony, to ask questions about things I did not understand, and to listen to what the concerns of the Vodou community were. In a case such as the above, it was interesting to note that neither the *ounsi* nor the *Manbo* who was possessed could figure out the meaning of the message.

This sequence of ceremonial events could change depending on the type of ceremony and the setting. *Rada* rites include whip cracking and fire during the opening libations. Public ceremonies were usually held in a different location and, therefore, had to adapt to these surroundings. In addition, once someone was possessed, it was up to the *lwa* where the ceremony went next. However, this basic outline of the ceremonies held at *Manbo* Sallie Ann's *peristyle* is interesting because, despite her training in Haiti, the ceremonies have been modified for the needs of those living in New Orleans. This is evident in both the *lwas* worshipped and the ways in which rituals are conducted. In many ways, *Manbo* Sallie Ann is a great example of how Vodou in New Orleans is constantly interacting with new cultures, values, and ideas and the ways in which the people adapt it to fit their current needs.

*Manbo* Sallie Ann was born in Maine in a Jewish family. She is a short, thin, blonde-haired Caucasian woman who moved to New Orleans in 1977. However, she was always interested in the spiritual and began working with Tarot and yoga in her teens to control her

psychic abilities that others found invasive and disconcerting. She moved to New Orleans both on a whim and because her brother was teaching at Tulane. The day after she moved to New Orleans, she happened to meet Andre the Martinique, a local character from Martinique who worked at the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum. He was considered very psychic and took her under his wing to help develop her spiritual abilities and introduced her to Vodou. Through a fraternal order that she became involved in, she also met Chere Ito who was married to Teiji Ito, Maya Deren's husband at the time of her death. Chere's head was ruled by *Lasiren* and, unlike some of the other people *Manbo* Sallie Ann had encountered, Chere did not try to impress her with how she personally practiced Vodou religion. Through these contacts, she became interested in Vodou, studied with practitioners, and became a Vodouist herself. She began holding weekly ceremonies in 1980 in her home and shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit, built the *peristyle* in the Bywater neighborhood where it still stands today.

As she became more and more involved with Vodou, she began to be interested in Haitian forms of the religion. *Manbo* Sallie Ann traveled to Haiti in 1995, where she was trained and initiated as a *Manbo* in Port-au-Prince under Papa Edgar. Since then, she has visited Haiti a number of times and has brought others to be trained and initiated as well. Papa Edgar has also visited New Orleans on a few occasions – most recently in the summer of 2007 when I got to meet him. He has chosen *Manbo* Sallie Ann as the person he will pass on all of his knowledge about healing, plants, magical charms, and the religion. Therefore, she has brought his teachings and methods to her New Orleans *peristyle*. However, she modifies them for her American participants because Haitian ceremonies are confusing and overwhelming for many people who are used to the order and regular procession of most Christian rituals. At

ceremonies in Haiti, it is typical for numerous rituals to be going on at once with participants dancing, singing, being possessed, and making offerings all at the same time. For *Manbo Sallie Ann*, this was exciting and powerful but, when she introduced other Americans to this type of ritual, they often reacted negatively. She found it much more effective to organize her rituals in a more orderly fashion so that it was clear what was going on and what was expected of participants at each step. Here ceremonies are “more orderly... [in Haiti] you’d see every element that we do but it’s just infinitely more chaotic”(Manbo Sallie Ann 08/08/07). In Haiti, ceremonies are not only more hectic to the Western observer, but they are very lengthy. Typically, they go on late into the night and are dedicated to numerous *lwas*, not just one at a time as *Manbo Sallie Ann*’s ceremonies are. Haitian ceremonies also sacrifice animals but, since *Manbo Sallie Ann* is a vegetarian, she uses the *asson* (ritual rattle) to stir up participants’ energy in lieu of a blood sacrifice. This is also more appealing to visitors who come to her ceremonies since, in America, our distance from the process of food production can paint animal sacrifice as a bloody, violent act. To further attract outsiders, she has instituted the hand, face, and feet washings at the beginning of ceremonies to involve the observers in the ceremony and encourage them to participate.

Interestingly, it seems that Papa Edgar did not always approve of all of these changes. One night after the ceremony, the *Ounfo* discussed how they needed to correct some things before Papa Edgar arrived in town. The *peristyle* was rearranged to fit with his aesthetic; new songs were learned in Creole and clapping was added so that Papa Edgar would approve of the *Ounfo*’s methods of conducting Vodou ceremonies. After he left, however, most of the rituals returned to their previous format. *Manbo Sallie Ann*’s ceremonies do vary in comparison from a

typical Haitian ceremony, and, according to Manbo Sallie Ann, this has been a raging debate in the Vodou community. However, she says that, while there are indeed certain elements that remain the same, “every ceremony that [she has] ever been to in Haiti has been different from every other ceremony. And people talk about ... the order of events in the ceremony and it’s never the same twice, it’s just not” (Interview August 8, 2007). For her, these changes in her own rituals are not deviating from the Vodou tradition but, rather, a continuation of the constant innovation that goes on in Haiti.

*Manbo* Sallie Ann has also altered the *peristyle* itself from the typical Haitian Vodou temple. The alley it was built in had a lot of crime, police chases, and drug use because it was dark and secluded. For these practical reasons, the *Ounfo* needed to be able to close the temple up when not in use and secure the altars inside. Sallie Ann said that, “unlike a Haitian *peristyles*, I had to make it enclosed. A Haitian *peristyle* is much more open than that building is. It wouldn’t have walls or the walls would be open. There would be large openings in it. It is more like a covered courtyard” (08/08/07). Typically, Haitian *peristyles* also have dirt floors, but the rainy climate of the city did not make that practical either.

These innovations and changes might seem odd in light of the fact that it is the sacred space and action of the ritual itself that are necessary to draw the *lwas* to the ceremony. However, when asked about that, *Manbo* Sallie Ann pointed out that, as long as the *lwas* come and do not reprimand the participants for the ways in which the ritual was conducted, then they must approve of it. In many ways, Vodou is very open to change despite its ties to the past and its heritage. Two such examples are the ways in which new *lwas* come to be worshiped and

how changes in the honor of pre-existing *lwas* can occur. Both of these occurred at the St. John's Eve ceremony on June 23, 2007.

St. John's Eve is the night before the saint day of St. John the Baptist but also corresponds with the summer solstice. Vodou practitioners in New Orleans have celebrated this day ever since Marie Laveau made it famous and perhaps before then. The Vodou Queen would hold elaborate ceremonies on the banks of Bayou St. John that were the talk of the tabloids (Long 2006). *Manbo* Sallie Ann continues this tradition by holding June's monthly public ceremony on this date. However, since much of the swampy area of the bayou was drained into Lake Pontchartrain, the ceremony is held on a footbridge over Bayou St. John across from Cabrini High School in the city. This area is more accessible to most people than the swamps, and the footbridge provides a stable, flat gathering place for rituals and offerings. *Manbo* Sallie Ann's ceremony is dedicated to Marie Laveau and we were asked to bring offerings appropriate for the Vodou Queen. The flier and email sent out on June 21, 2007, suggested that Marie Laveau prefers "flowers, blue and white candles, hair ribbons and hair dressing supplies (She was a hairdresser)., [sic] Vodou-esque items (Voodoo dolls, potions, *gris-gris* bags, etc.), or images of Marie Laveau" (email from *Manbo* Sallie Ann). This is particularly interesting because Marie Laveau is not a *lwa* in Haitian Vodou and, therefore, *Manbo* Sallie Ann could not have learned about the Vodou Queen from Papa Edgar. Marie Laveau of course, is well known in New Orleans and *Manbo* Sallie Ann is familiar with her. When she first began conducting ceremonies on Bayou St. John, they were dedicated to St. John the Baptist. However, the spirit of Marie Laveau possessed *Manbo* Sallie Ann at one of these ceremonies. Marie told the

congregation that she was now a *lwa* and, ever since then, the *Ounfo* has held yearly ceremonies dedicated to her spirit.

I attended this ceremony [with my husband] because I was told by a number of informants that St. John's Eve was a very important day in New Orleans Vodou. We joined the group of about forty or so white-clad participants on the bridge around 6:45 p.m. The bridge had wooden planks that formed the walkway and light blue metalwork supports. A small, two-tiered altar covered in light blue cloth had been set up in the middle of the bridge. Candles, flowers, Florida water, and a statue of Marie Laveau had been placed on the temporary altar. *Manbo* Sallie Ann gave general directions about the ceremony and told us that there would be a *lavé-tété* (head washing). We were instructed to keep the head washings on all night because it will help us have prophetic dreams or maybe even entice a dreamtime visit from Marie Laveau herself.

The ceremony began in the normal way with purification and libations. Those of us who brought offerings placed them on or in front of the altar for Marie Laveau. Songs, prayers, and drumming continued as *Manbo* Sallie Ann drew *veves* for *Legba*, *The Marassa*, *Papa Loko*, and *Ayizan*. As the sky was changing colors from the setting sun, we bent for the first prayer and the bells from a nearby church began to toll. After prayers had been said for each of the four *lwas*, *Manbo* Sallie Ann drew a fleur-de-lis shaped *veve* for Marie Laveau. Then, the head washings began. Cake, flowers, liquor, Florida water, and other offerings that had been placed on the altar were all mixed up in bowls. Three stations were set up for washings. We each went up one by one and had our heads, faces, elbows, hands, feet, and necks washed. Leaving the mixture on our bodies, the *ounsi* retied our head coverings and we walked to the back to dance.

As the dances continued, one of the *Ounsi* became possessed. In the beginning, he appeared to be *Gede* since he told the drummers to play the drums “like a woman’s ass.” However, he told a girl nearby that he was Dr. John, who, according to the folklore, was either Marie Laveau’s teacher, arch nemesis, or both. He said he was waiting for Marie Laveau and walked off to talk to other people at the ceremony and drink rum. *Manbo* Sallie Ann became possessed shortly thereafter by Marie Laveau. But, before anything else could happen, an older Native American man who frequented the ceremonies went up to her and began to convulse. She and Dr. John administered to him with prayers and laying of hands and Dr. John also rubbed rum on the man’s stomach. Once the crisis was over, Dr. John asked if Marie was still there. *Manbo* Sallie Ann replied in the negative, so he introduced himself. He told her that he was Dr. John and he now wanted to be included in her weekly ceremonies. He described how he would like his initials included in *Ayizan’s veve*. *Manbo* Sallie Ann said she would do this if he promised to send her some permanent drummers. He agreed and she promised to include him once she was given the drummers. The *lwa* left the man’s body shortly after that and the ceremony came to a close with the final prayers.

This ceremony was interesting for a number of reasons. Each ritual marks out the sacred space using libations, the outlining of the inner circle with the machete, and the placement of candles at the edges of the area. Typically, this all occurs in the *peristyles*, where it is already understood that the presence of the altars makes the space sacred and separate from the secular everyday world. However, during the monthly public prayer ceremonies, these sacred rites are conducted in spaces that are not usually viewed as religious areas. The ceremony was also conducted for a *lwa* that was not traditionally thought to be part of the Vodou pantheon.



Yet, through possession, previously unknown spirits are able to contact believers directly and request to be honored in ceremonies the way that Dr. John did. This direct contact between the human and the divine creates a way for innovation to occur and still meet the approval of the *lwas*. As *Manbo* Sallie Ann said, “There are old ones and new ones and some get forgotten and just vanish... And then there are new ones like Marie Laveau who is clearly becoming a *lwa* of New Orleans while they’ve never heard of her in Haiti and wouldn’t have any idea what you were talking about” (08/08/07). If a Vodouist fails to acknowledge a new or old spirit, they can face illness and misfortune. Without servators, the *lwa* will eventually vanish and, therefore, can become angry and vengeful if ignored. However, Vodou practitioners’ attitudes towards the *lwas* is a practical one, requiring that the spirits provide for them as well, as was seen in *Manbo* Sallie Ann’s response to Dr. John’s request.

Haitian Vodou in New Orleans is clearly not purely Haitian. Rather, like the other types of Vodou practiced in the City, it has changed and adapted to both spiritual and practical needs. Some of these modifications are to appeal to Americans, some are done for practical constraints of finances, law, and environment, and others are due to spiritual intervention. Like Vodou in Haiti, New Orleans Vodou is not a static entity but, rather, a collection of beliefs, and practices held by members and non-members that are fluid and malleable. Changes in politics, economy, cultural influences, and other social issues can alter the ways in which the religion is practiced. However, Vodou, like many African-based religions, holds ancestors and tradition in high regard. Therefore, in spite of these innovations, Vodouists all over New Orleans share sacred spaces, beliefs and symbols even if they do not always acknowledge this themselves.

These spaces are sometimes clearly marked, such as graveyards and the *peristyle*, but other places are created in public spaces that Vodouists and non-Vodouists will move through. For example, on April 7, 2007, *Manbo* Sallie Ann held a *Ra-Ra* Parade as the public ceremony for April. According to the flier for the ceremony, “*Ra-Ra* are similar to a Haitian version of Mardi Gras Indians’ second lines. During Lent, the *Ra-Ra* parades go out of the temples to wind a mystical path through the streets, stirring up magic and power and bringing spiritual life force to the streets.” We gathered at the *peristyle* at seven o’clock dressed in red and purple and headed out from there into the streets of the Ninth Ward neighborhood. Some of the *ounsi* sang songs inspired by the landscape while those of us that did not know the songs played instruments or threw small clay balls filled with seeds into grassy areas to grow positive energy. At each intersection, we stopped, prayed and one of the *ounsi* “swept up” a dropped red cloth with a small broom. A cross made of glitter was sprinkled onto the street and a song was sung to the *lwas*. We then moved on to the next intersection making our way from Rampart Street to Franklin Street, down past Royal Street, and all the way to the wharf. Periodically, trees and other features of the landscape would inspire the singers and we would stop to honor them with song and ritual (See figure #15).

We walked around New Orleans in a swell of drumming and singing for about two hours. The music had no set rhythm or beat – it changed at the whim of the drummers and the horn players let out long blasts whenever it felt appropriate. The singer grabbed an empty glass bottle and hit it with a stick in rhythm with the drums. There was an air of carnival about the proceedings, despite the religious nature of the parade. Three children that were about seven or eight started following our procession, dancing in the streets, and laughing. However, as we

made our way through the Ninth Ward, the Vodouists were clearly marking space in the streets through ritual and energy. As Yi-Fu Tuan notes in his 1978 article, “Where physical boundaries are inconspicuous or absent, processions serve to establish apartness” (85). The *Ra-Ra* Parade serves to announce their presence to the community and infuse the neighborhood with spiritual power. For *Manbo* Sallie Ann, all space is sacred; yet, these rituals create paths of connections to the transcendent that residents in cars, bicycles, and on foot will pass through permeating their being with energy. The balls of clay will dissolve into fertilizer for the seeds, allowing the spirit-filled plants to grow and create new sacred spaces in this secular neighborhood. Such public ceremonies create sacred space in areas shared by Vodouists and non-Vodouists. The majority of the people I found who belonged to The Religion lived in the Ninth Ward, so they too are interacting with this new sacred space even if they do not realize it. Feet and wheels spread the glitter, the plants grow in unsuspecting gardens, and the community is connected through an intersecting web of sacred crossroads.



Figure 16 *Ra-Ra* Parade. Photo taken by Daniel Crocker on April 7, 2007. Used with permission.

## CHAPTER 6.

### CONCLUSIONS ON A CONTINUING PROCESS OF BECOMING

Vodou in New Orleans is a mixture of practices and beliefs that permeate many facets of the city – some in obvious and defined ways and others in more indistinct and blurred manners. There are tourist shops, guided tours, and souvenirs. Generations of The Faithful have carried on secret religious practices since the days of slavery. In addition, newer members of the faith, initiated in places like Haiti, have adapted their religion to the city. Vodou practitioners proclaim their presence through public ceremonies and altars, but they are also everyday believers who use their faith to interpret and manage their world. Innovations for practical and spiritual purposes have divided and altered groups, but they still share many symbols and spaces. Vodou in New Orleans is not merely a mixture of ideas but, rather, a hybrid of influences, beliefs, and worldviews that are constantly coming together in the shared sacred spaces of the city.

There are a number of ways that scholars have attempted to explain the manner in which different cultures mix and become intertwined. Melville Herskovits used the term syncretism to explain how when two groups come together parts of both cultures are maintained (though perhaps somewhat changed and reinterpreted) while others fade away. He argued that in religions like Vodou, those elements, which corresponded with the dominant culture, were preserved and associated with those symbols while other elements that had no connecting points to the new influence were eventually lost (Herskovits 1966, Kapchan and Strong 1999). This does help explain how certain West African spirits became associated with Catholic saints that bear similar attitudes, powers, and/or physical attributes and eventually

became the *lwas* that exist today. For example, the serpent *Iwa Damballah* is associated with St. Patrick, even though the saint drove the “snakes” out of Ireland, giving him a negative association with serpents in Catholicism. Both are visually represented with serpent imagery and, therefore, are linked despite the different meanings of the snakes. St. Patrick is *Damballah* in Haitian Vodou without contradiction to the practitioners.

In this system of syncretism, the African significance is preserved because, while the system is Catholic in form, it is African in meaning. The dominant group enforces their religious system but the subordinate population maintains their customs by incorporating these structures and giving it their own meaning (Herskovits 1955). However, there are elements of Vodou ceremonies not found in Catholic ones, despite Catholicism being the dominant cultural power in the days of slavery. Syncretism does not explain how cultures use sources both inside and outside their own systems to adapt to changing conditions. Nor does it allow for two separate cultures coexisting and subtly influencing one another.

Claude Levi-Strauss presented the concept of bricolage to elucidate how groups take elements from different cultures and recombine them in new, meaningful ways. Unlike syncretism, bricolage models do not require the new creations to be a result of significant corresponding points but, rather, leave room for the arbitrary and even playful ways that cultures incorporate new symbols and meanings (Kapchan and Strong 1999). Yet, this concept too is only useful in explaining some parts of this process. It is true that groups can incorporate elements based on their aesthetic appeal or other reasons that do not take into account their original meanings. However, there are times when people purposefully select portions of another culture due to the ways in which they correspond to either existing points in their own

system or parts that are currently coming into being and as of yet do not have a meaningful symbol in their own culture.

More recently, the term creolization has been popular in illuminating the ways cultures influence one another and come together. This concept originally comes from linguistics where it was used to describe new languages that were the result of a pidgin. That is, two language groups that interacted with one another, often for the purpose of trade, which over time often developed a common and simplistic language to communicate, usually with the dominant group's language having the most influence. When parents taught these pidgins to children as a first language it became a Creole. Other scholars such as Roger Abrahams (1983) soon saw the appeal of this explanation as a way to analyze how cultural groups create more than just a Creole language when in contact with one another but, rather, a whole Creole culture. Dominant cultures, such as the French and Spanish in New Orleans, would be more influential in the outside and public aspects of this new, mixed society but the subdominant group's symbols and worldviews might still exist either in private spaces or through becoming attached to accepted forms of the dominant group's cultural elements (Abrahams 1983, Kapchan and Strong 1999). New Orleans and Haiti have both been described as Creole cultures and do indeed fit nicely into some of these models. However, while creolization is very helpful in explaining cultures that are buffer zones between two other groups, or the early stages of cultural mixings, it does not do a very good job explaining how once the dominant and subdominant hierarchy dissipates cultures still continue using these symbols in meaningful ways. Not all innovations and changes are the result of power plays and scholars must find a way to explain ongoing changes to cultures.

This is where the promise of hybridity came into play. The term originally came from the biological description of mixed heritage and genes. It has been used in a number of ways over the past twenty years to explain the blending of cultures and composite nature of many groups. It has been used to clarify everything from genetic mixing, to art, to politics, in both positive and negative ways (Kapchan and Strong 1999). In some instances, it is used in almost the same way that creolization is and at other times, it just describes the addition of new cultural elements. Quite often, it is also employed to illustrate the ways two already fully formed cultures come together and mix, creating new cultures. Criticisms of these uses of the term in this way are quite valid because they do not describe the way in which people and cultures exist and act. Societies are not static and to describe them as fully formed is to assume that they have somehow reached a pinnacle from which they will no longer change or deviate. However, cultures are in a constant state of flux and modification in response to the conditions that groups find themselves in. “Cultures may be grasped as porous, constantly changing and borrowing, while nevertheless being able to retain at any particular historical moment the capacity to shock through deliberate confluences and subversions of sanctified orderings” (Pnina Werbner 2001:134). This term, however, has been used by authors – even Pnina Werbner – to discuss mixed cultures successfully once hybridity has been carefully defined and explained in the context of these complicated issues and processes.

Ideally, a new term would be invented to incorporate the complex and ongoing ways in which cultures incorporate and reinterpret elements from other societies. However, considering the failure of so many previous terms and the relative short length of this thesis, it is more useful to follow in the steps of scholars such as Werbner and use the term hybridity



with the necessary conditions. The same goes for the term liminality, which has achieved periods of both popularity and negative associations. Anthropologically, liminality has been used to describe in-between times such as those during a rite of passage when the person is neither what they were nor what they will become at the conclusion of the ritual (Victor Turner 1970). Since Turner's initial use of the term, it has been expanded to include spaces and situations other than rites of passage that are thresholds between one place (literally or spiritually) and the next. These liminal spaces can be both religious and secular, and can be special to a specific group while still being important to other factions. They can be private, and public, and have different meanings to different groups. I argue that in light of my research, Vodou practices in New Orleans can be explained using these two terms when considered in the specific nuanced ways that incorporate the ever changing and becoming nature of cultures.

Vodou in New Orleans is the product of French, Spanish, West African, and other cultures that have all lived in the city and interacted with one another. The forced conversion to Catholicism meant that enslaved West Africans had to find ways to meaningfully incorporate their beliefs within this new dominant system. Over generations this has developed into a unique religion, but like all religions and cultures it has adapted depending on issues the society faces such as changing environments, political situations, and spiritual needs. Cultures also hybridize organically, as Werbner points out, being influenced by other groups and systems without the people within them even realizing it at the time. Day to day interactions lead to changes in the "traditional" ways of doing and conceptualizing (Werbner 2001). These aspects can be seen in some of the more recent innovations and adaptations that have occurred in the populations I researched.

As tourism in the city grows so too does the influence and prevalence of Vodou in New Orleans. Vodou has survived due to its flexibility and ability to adapt to the often stressful and complicated situations adherents find themselves in. Whether it is slavery, poverty, or devastating hurricanes, Vodouists have turned to their religion to assist them, and in turn have modified their practices to fit with changing situations and organically to incorporate new influences. These organic hybridizations occur multidirectionally meaning that Vodou absorbs new elements but it also gives meaning to spaces and events previously not there to non-practitioners. For example, tour guides weave stories around buildings, tombs, and parks that create new spiritual significance to spaces and history. The tomb of Marie Laveau is no longer a place just for Vodouists but people all over the world can make pilgrimages to it and learn about the religious and historical meanings tied into that space and memory.

Practitioners such as Manbo Sallie Ann have modified their rituals and sacred spaces to fit in with American mental conceptions of spiritual experiences as well as practical needs of a peristyle in a crime-ridden area. These adaptations have created changes in both the physical structure of the temple and the rituals that are conducted within. Growing up with Judaism, studying Yoga and Tarot, becoming initiated in Santeria and a fraternal order etc. all shape her engagement with the practice of Vodou. In turn, whether organically or intentionally, she passes on these influences to the people she trains and initiates. In many ways, Manbo Sallie Ann's spiritual practices embody hybridity.

In contrast, other groups such as The Faithful present their religion as pure and untouched by the influences of outsiders and time. Brenda Marie Osbey rejects associations with Haitian Vodou and even suggests the influence of Catholicism is limited. Outsiders cannot

convert because power and membership is transmitted through bloodlines. The balance and cleanliness of the faith depends on both individuals and the community maintaining distance from external influences. This setting apart from the everyday protects The Religion from the profane and elevates it to the sacred. Yet the very fact that The Faithful have had to react and pull back from the public means that they have in some manner engaged with the outside. In setting her faith up in contrast to Haitian and tourist Vodou, Osbey has evaluated and rejected the claims of these other groups. In her view, they are not authentic New Orleans Vodou because their origins are impure.

This creates a politicized space where a dichotomy is created between The Religion and Haitian Vodou. Whereas The Faithful reject outside influences and worshippers, Haitian Vodou embraces new converts. Members of The Religion patrol the boundaries of their faith, protecting it from the profane. Yet for adherents of Haitian forms of Vodou the unpredictable demands of the lwas legitimize and provide a means of adaptation and change in the light of new situations. Osbey views her religion as the only one with legitimate claims to authentic practices in the city. Yet, Manbo Sallie Ann has embraced both the city and New Orleans Vodou personalities that Osbey rejects such as Marie Laveau. Through announcing her possession by Marie Laveau, Manbo Sallie Ann has proclaimed her acceptance by the Vodou Queen and therefore the authenticity of her religious practices in New Orleans. In the middle of these clashes over theological space, tourist venues incorporate aspects of both types in order to make money but also create meaningful sacred spaces of their own.

This dispute over space and authenticity in the city reveals how important space is both geographically and conceptually to practitioners. "Place is not just a spatial, or even a spatial

and temporal, notion; it is also a poetic and aesthetic conception and a political strategy” (MacDonald 2003:3). Space is personal and communal, literal and theoretical. Some areas are created and set aside for specific religious activities, and rituals reinforce the sacred nature of this space. Yet, the sacred cannot be confined to one specific locale. Whether in discussions about Vodou or Islam, scholars recognize that the divine, “is not contained in any place but is beyond the world” (MacDonald 2003:10). The spirit can be worshipped in public shared spaces such as graveyard, street crossroads, and even tourist venues. This struggle over the right to practice Vodou in New Orleans comes from the importance placed upon the city. “As biological beings we occupy space and as cultural beings, engaged in various forms of religion, we transform it into place” (MacDonald 2003:17). New Orleans has become culturally significant for the practitioners, converting a secular city into a sacred place.

Despite the lines that practitioners draw between their beliefs and others, these groups are hybrids not only in their past but of one another today. They share common symbols and beliefs as well as spaces and continue to remake and redefine themselves as their edges ebb and flow. They share a common history of West Africa, Catholicism and must currently grapple with the negative stereotypes that they all endure. Tourist venues use the “authenticity” of Vodou altars to attract tourists and practitioners alike while Vodouists such as Priestess Miriam and *Manbo* Sallie Ann sell charms and sometimes perform for tourist dollars. These public performances not only pay the bills but also introduce tourists and outsiders to their religion, at times influencing these sightseers to convert and become insiders themselves. The history and myth of New Orleans Vodouists such as Marie Laveau attract tourists but also provide meaningful points of connection for practitioners in both space such as that of Bayou St. John

and Marie Laveau's tomb and in spirit with connections to the *lwas* of Marie Laveau and Dr. John. The commercialization and tourification of Vodou has forced The Faithful to retreat into secrecy, yet they share sacred space with these groups.

These connections are interwoven through both symbols and space, creating a web of significance that weaves itself tightly around certain points of the city for all Vodouists in New Orleans. Changes and activities in one area tug on the strands and influence others, sometimes strengthening connections and other times creating new ones. Many of these spaces are liminal in nature in that they are both sacred and profane, public and private. At times, the sacred is temporal while other spaces are permanently separate from the secular. Public places such as tourist shops can become private religious spaces just as private temples can be opened to public sightseers. Rather than being contradictory, these spaces fit in with many cultures' concepts of reality both in the West and outside of it.

Altars and peristyles are clearly defined sacred spaces that are routinely reinforced through rituals. As Yi-Fu Tuan says, "As a thing becomes 'holy' it is cut off from surrounding space" (1978: 85). However, he goes on to point out that religion is not bounded by the walls of a church or temple. It exists in the beliefs and actions of practitioners and therefore ventures out into the rest of the world along with the members of the faith. Religious experiences can take place in the secular world just as they can occur in the sacred and for many the sacred emanates from all aspects of life. This makes religion infinitely difficult to map or calculate since it cannot be plotted the same way a physical feature can. However, the sacred can still be conceptualized spatially through the recognition rather than overlooking of the complex and sometimes temporal nature of the sacred.

Geographers such as Lily Kong have pointed out that, “even while the sacred is often constructed, and gathers meaning in opposition to the secular, place is often multivalent, and requires an acknowledgement of simultaneous, fluctuating and conflicting investment of sacred and secular meanings in any one site” (Kong 2001: 212) Locations in New Orleans can be public and secular while still being private and sacred. For example, the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum is a private business but it is open to the public. It is a secular enterprise but has been appropriated as a religious site and therefore is regularly transformed from the profane into the sacred. Such seemingly contradictory spaces are not unique to New Orleans. Lily Kong has explored the “unofficially sacred” residential spaces in Singapore and more broadly the creation and use of sacred space in urban settings. Due to financial difficulties in acquiring land, many religious groups in Singapore weekly turn different secular spaces into sacred ones that connect to the transcendent. Some religious communities have even banded together with other churches to purchase a permanent structure that despite their different religious beliefs they will share. “The distinct break between that which is sacred and that which is secular that has hitherto consumed analytical attention must now be rethought and focus given to that which is betwixt and between” (Kong 2002:1585). Urban landscapes nestle the sacred and secular together so closely that at times they become intertwined with one another, a liminal landscape of neither completely religious nor completely profane (2002).

Likewise, religion is not bound to these spaces but travels with the believers as they move throughout the city. Catherine Brace, Adrian R. Bailey and David C. Harvey (2006) have shown how Methodism in Cornwall, UK pervades all aspects of the believers’ lives, including the spaces they encounter – officially religious or not. As Vodouists pass through New Orleans,

they too experience the world through the eyes of their religion. It influences their actions, reactions and interpretations. For Vodouists, the spirit is with them and around them at all times. *Manbo* Sallie Ann said, “The everyday world is sacred, all of us are sacred, we’re all containers of spirit, every tree... everything out there is the *lwa*. That’s why I find it interesting when we do a ceremony out in the street or in a hotel lobby. That it becomes really clear that everything really is sacred. The mundane is sacred” (interview August 8, 2007). This normalcy of the sacred means that practitioners are always encountering the divine as they weave their way through the city, crossing paths and creating meanings both personally and as groups.

This is true as well for other Vodouists, some more than others. Brenda Marie Osbey said, “Religion makes us. We’re born into this and it intimately shapes who we are. Everything that I know to be true about myself or that I think to be true comes from this religion” (03/05/08). *Manbo* Sallie Ann’s mentor, Papa Edgar, visits from Haiti where he was born and raised but each time the city of New Orleans hits him with the power and sacredness that permeates from every street. “To Edgar everything that we think of as invisible is not only visible but very populous and full of life and meaning and so when he’s walking down the street there’s a whole lot more that is going on than is going on for us... He’s even said he’s a little unnerved by New Orleans because there are so many spirits floating around. . I don’t think he questions the why of it – there just are” (interview August 8, 2007). Vodouists teach that their religion is not an interpretation of reality so much as an acceptance of it. But while the sacred flows all around, certain areas do permeate with spirit naturally and through human creation.

Altars and temples are intentionally created spaces to house the sacred and set it apart from the everyday world. These are areas that certain secular activities are frowned upon and

which must be maintained in order to define it against the profane. For example, the temple that *Manbo* Sallie Ann has built and keeps is reserved for religious activities and sometimes community outreach. “The only time a person sleeps in there is when we’re doing initiations. It is the place where the meaning is focused on that space” (interview August 8, 2007). Likewise, the temple that Priestess Miriam maintains is separate from her retail shop and is not open to casual visitors. The altars of The Faithful like Brenda Marie Osbey are a connection to the ancestors and loved ones, providing a portal for protection and healing. “We don’t have temples or places that we go to. We create our temples within and our altars are reflections of that” (Osbey 03/05/08). However, sacred spaces can also be created outside of these defined lines in public arenas that normally are purely secular.

*Manbo* Sallie Ann’s monthly public ceremonies bring these religious activities and rituals to the public sphere creating sacred space temporarily in a profane area. The St. John’s Eve Ceremony on the footbridge involved an impermanent altar and defining of the space with libations, candles and ritual. Despite being outside the officially sacred space, the *Iwa* still blessed the gathering with a possession and the footbridge became a liminal space where humans and the divine could meet. Here the spirit crossed over into the earthly plane to embody the believer, speak, and administer to the faithful. Other public ceremonies such as the *Ra-Ra* Parade went out into the neighborhood and transformed the public streets through rituals at each crossroads. These geographic locations temporarily recreated reality and imbued the streets with power and spirit.

During the *Ra-Ra* Parade and on other occasions practitioners have also turned to natural sites as locations of sacred power and experience. During the parade, practitioners



stopped at trees that inspired them. The Vodouists sang songs, made libations, and drew crossroads for the spirits that lived inside the trees. Likewise, my introduction to Papa Edgar was interrupted because a tree spirit called out to him and required him to follow it with a flashlight to a specific point where an offering was necessary. Here the spiritual power existed already in nature and instead of humans creating the sacred, the sacred reached out to them. For members of The Religion the very soil of New Orleans is sacred ground. Yet as is the character of Vodou, in return for this the practitioners were obliged to reinforce the space through ceremonies and offerings. As these organic spaces become recognized and emphasized through repeated use, other practitioners become aware of their existence and in turn, they utilize the sacred space for their own rituals and needs.

But perhaps the most liminal and personal of spaces that become sacred during rituals are the bodies of the believers themselves. Prayers, libations, songs, and anointing with water or the *veve* prepare the body of the Vodouist for the infusion of the sacred. During a possession the spirit of the horse is no longer in the body but nor is it in the spirit world where the *lwa* was. Rather it exists in a liminal space between earth and heaven, human and divine. But the body does touch the divine as the spirit enters the temporary housing and the rest of the observers can encounter the transcendent through the private body of the possessed person. The *lwa* can use the body to speak to the congregation, eat, and drink not only the physical substance of the offerings but the spiritual power from them as well. Once the possession is over the person's spirit returns to his or her body and they are no longer a portal to the divine and are no longer relevant to the other participants' religious experience. However, they do temporarily experience a difference in being from the spiritual residue of the *lwas*. "Each time

you have a possession experience even though you don't have an actual memory of that experience it alters you I would say on a cellular level. And, it alters your frequency and so you start to take in some other archetypal perspective. ... it can last anything from a few seconds to hours, days" (*Manbo Sallie Ann 08/08/07*).

These spaces and cultural hybridities in New Orleans Vodou practices intermingle and influence one another and their paths cross throughout space and time. Liminal sacred spaces are created in the public streets and in private homes, and bodies. Important landmarks are shared with practitioners and tourists alike reinforcing old meanings and creating new ones. As situations change so too do the cultures that are forced to deal with them. But hybridity occurs organically as well, ebbing and flowing along with the curiosity of those who influence it. Vodou in New Orleans is a trinity of tourist, traditional and outsider – they have separated themselves into different spheres yet when taken in as a whole they share spaces, symbols, and meanings.

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## **VITA**

Elizabeth Thomas Crocker obtained her Bachelor of Arts in anthropology with a minor in religious studies from Louisiana State University in 2004. After a two-year hiatus, she returned to Louisiana State University where she is currently enrolled in the anthropology masters program and hopes to graduate in May of 2008. Her focus is on cultural anthropology and modern Vodou practices in New Orleans.