

LANGUAGE LEVEL: A2-PRE-INTERMEDIATE

# NEW ORLEANS VOODOO CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS

Divididos entre sus cultos ancestrales y la fe católica de los blancos, los esclavos africanos crearon el vudú en América. Nueva Orleans es la capital de esta práctica.

**N**ew Orleans is famous for its Voodoo heritage<sup>1</sup>. The city's history and its customs<sup>2</sup> were formed by this ancient African religion. Forget the Hollywood films and their horrific zombies. New Orleans' Voodoo is a religion with surprising links<sup>3</sup> to the Catholic Church.

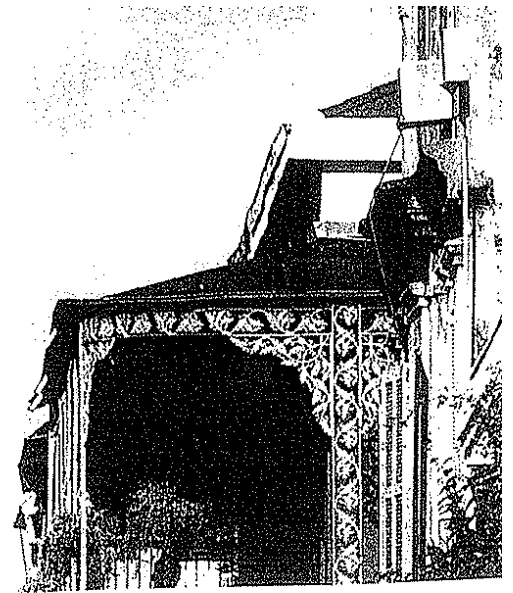
## SLAVERY

Slaves<sup>4</sup> brought the Voodoo religion to the United States in the 18th century. The slave trade usually divided families, but in New Orleans and Louisiana, families worked together on plantations. So a strong

community developed and they maintained their Voodoo beliefs and customs.

## THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Voodoo practitioners worship<sup>5</sup> one god, and the spirits of ancestors<sup>6</sup>. Their religion had many similarities to the colonial French settlers' Catholicism: one god, saints who act as intermediaries and the practice of giving offerings<sup>7</sup> to these saints for favours. In fact the two religions have combined over the centuries to form a unique Louisiana religion. Voodoo, however, uses magic. This involves secret rituals and *gris gris* – Voodoo dolls<sup>8</sup> or small pouches<sup>9</sup>



of herbs and personal objects. The Voodoo doll isn't used for revenge<sup>10</sup>. Forget the idea of evil witches<sup>11</sup> pushing<sup>12</sup> pins<sup>13</sup> into dolls. The doll is used to focus energy. There are fertility dolls, good luck dolls, dolls to cure illnesses<sup>14</sup> and so on. Voodoo practitioners believe in karma, so hurting<sup>15</sup> others is not advised<sup>16</sup>.

## THE VOODOO QUEEN

A key figure in New Orleans' Voodoo culture is the Voodoo Queen or priestess. The most famous of these was Marie Laveau, Voodoo Queen of New Orleans in the 1830s. Visitors can find her tomb in St Louis Cemetery, one of New Orleans' legendary Cities of the Dead. These cemeteries look like small cities because of their many splendid and sometimes ruined tombs.

## HURRICANE KATRINA

There are many Voodoo rituals: blessings<sup>17</sup> of cemeteries, the Mississippi, wedding ceremonies. But the most important is the Hurricane Protection Ritual performed by the priestess Mambo Sallie Ann every July. Cynics suggest the ritual failed<sup>18</sup> when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. But other people say that Katrina heard their drums<sup>19</sup> and changed direction at the final moment. The city was saved from total destruction.

## The Legend of Queen Marie Laveau

This legend gives a real insight<sup>20</sup> into New Orleans' secret Voodoo culture. In the 1920s a vagabond decided to spend the night in St Louis Cemetery. He woke in the middle of the night and saw Marie Laveau and a giant<sup>21</sup> snake<sup>22</sup> glowing<sup>23</sup> in the dark<sup>24</sup>. Men and women danced around the queen. The terrified vagabond ran away. The legend can be explained. It is a secret ritual: the current Voodoo Queen leads her followers to the tomb of the ancient Queen Marie Laveau. The followers begin a silent dance. They invoke Marie Laveau, and ask for her blessing.

