



## **Voodoo in New Orleans**

*Robert Tallant*

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"Interesting investigation and straightforward handling of sensational times and tricksters, of the cult of voodooism in all its manifestations. From its first known appearances in New Orleans of 200 years ago, here are the fetishes and formulae, the rites and dances, the cures, charms and gris-gris. Here were the witch-doctors and queens, and in particular Doctor John, who acquired fame and fortune, and Marie Laveau, who with her daughter dominated the weird underworld of voodoo for nearly a century." Kirkus Reviews "Robert Tallant speaks with authority . . . ." New York Times "Much nonsense has been written about voodoo in New Orleans. . . here is a truthful and definitive picture." Lyle Saxton Both of Robert Tallant's highly praised books about the practice of voodoo in New Orleans have been re-issued in paperback. Originally published in 1946, Voodoo in New Orleans examines the origins of the cult voodooism. The lives of New Orleans's most infamous witch doctors and voodoo queens have been re-created in this well-researched account of New Orleans's dark underworld.

## **Voodoo in New Orleans Details**

Date : Published March 1st 1984 by Pelican Publishing Company (first published 1946)

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Author : Robert Tallant

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## From Reader Review Voodoo in New Orleans for online ebook

### Susan Budd says

Wait until midnight. Saint John's Eve. Light some candles. Maybe a bit of incense. Put *Gris-Gris* on the stereo. Listen to the Night Tripper. His gravelly voice, slow and swampy.

Moonglow over the *Vieux Carré*. Wherever you are, the Doctor is in.

? *I got medicine to cure all yall's ills.* ?

Listen to the chant. The call and response. The spooky seductive music. Dance to it. Sway to the drum beat. Drink your liquor and shed your clothing. Abandon yourself to *le Grand Zombi*.

That's my recommendation.

Or you could read *Voodoo in New Orleans*. But you'd rather listen to Dr. John. You'd rather go into a trance. Feel the heart of Voodoo. Take it in with all your senses. Robert Tallant has written a valuable book, but you want more.

Tallant's history is comprised of local newspaper reports and anecdotes recounted by elderly Orleanians. He includes a Voodoo song given to a reporter and printed in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* on March 16, 1924. Sung by the Voodoo Queen in Creole, it boasts of her power (20-21). But you can hear Dr. John's version in "I Walk On Gilded Splinters."

Tallant also includes a lengthy passage from C. D. Warner's *Studies in the South and West* where Warner describes a Voodoo ritual. Offerings were made before an altar, with the celebrants wildly chanting the "Calinda" (30).

"*Danse Calinda, boudoum, boudoum!*  
*Danse Calinda, boudoum, boudoum!*"

But you can hear this for yourself in Dr. John's "Danse Kalinda Ba Doom."

The longest of the three parts of *Voodoo in New Orleans* is devoted to Marie Laveau. As it should be. She was the Queen of the Voodoos ~ beautiful, powerful, cunning. People stepped aside when she walked by. A chapter is also devoted to Queen Julia Jackson. But you can hear Dr. John tell of the Voodoo Queens in "Mama Roux" and "Jump Sturdy."

Tallant's book is valuable because it compiles so many oral and ephemeral sources. The oral history would surely have been lost had it not been gathered by Tallant and others. Local newspaper articles and other such ephemera would have been forgotten. So it is a book that should be read. But to truly experience Voodoo in New Orleans, you'll want to get your gris-gris from the Doctor.

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### Beaird Glover says

This was the first book I read about Voodoo, and it was a wonderful introduction. Most of it is fiction, and many serious writers love to point out the myths in this book, and they well should. But this is still fun.

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### **Katy says**

2.5/5 stars

This is definitely a book of its time, written in the 1940's with the language and terminology that goes along with it. Part historical, part research, mostly superstition - and a lot of hearsay. Mostly conducted by interviews that may or may not have just been taken off the street. Interesting read, but not reliable except for some of the historical research the author did on Marie Laveau I & II. That and getting a glimpse at how people viewed Voodoo, both black and white, during that time period. Which the majority seems to just be rumors and hoodoo tales passed down from earlier generations that don't have much to do with the religion of Voodoo - especially modern Voodoo.

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### **T.D. Whittle says**

I stopped halfway through because the Voodoo rituals described in this book by the witnesses and participants Tallant interviewed were distressing to me. Some reviewers claim this book is just white men's ideas about voodoo as practised in Louisiana at the time, but it's not so simple as that. Robert Tallant was a respected researcher and interviewer. He interviewed a wide variety of local folks (both black and white) who knew about and participated in these rituals. I won't get into arguments with people about how much of this book is true or not, because we cannot be sure about that. Perhaps all those he interviewed were lying? If so, I would not be one to accuse them of that. They sound sincere enough.

What I do know is that animal sacrifice was then, and is now, still a part of religious ritual in many cultures and certainly is a valid aspect of Voodoo, whether or not modern practitioners choose to make use of it. (You can easily find information about this written by people defending the practice.) While most civilised religions stopped ritual sacrifice centuries ago and began using oblations instead, others have retained the blood rites of their ancestors. So, I knew the use of animals, both as objects of sacrifice and worship, would come up, but there was more description about this aspect of things than I expected.

Marie Laveau I and II seem like captivating women, and I liked learning about them. Marie I was especially well thought of, having worked as a healer in her own community during the Yellow Fever outbreak. Here's my favourite painting of her (below). You will see lots of Catholic iconography that she is using during her ritual. This was not unusual, since the strange gumbo that is New Orleans Voodoo combines elements of Roman Catholic iconography and ritual, with traditional African magical and religious rites involving sorcery and spirit possession.

"Spirit possession" in this context has nothing to do with the Holy Trinity or Pentecost (Whitsunday): Voodoo is neither an Abrahamic nor a monotheistic religion and, in practice, it has little to do with Christianity. The gods, saints, and spirits invoked and worshiped in Voodoo were (and are) many and varied. Despite Voodooists claiming to be Catholic, one does not have to look far into Voodoo (then or now) to see that the religions are fundamentally incompatible, and that Voodoo would be a sacrilege to any true Catholic (or any other Christian, for that matter). Voodoo is an animistic worldview, with its roots deeply buried in

the pagan folk religion from which it springs, so its weird syncretism with Catholicism seems an unholy alliance, at best. Voodoo wears Catholicism like a veil, a lightly-worn disguise that is easily discarded.

It's easy to feel sympathy for the plight of those who, through no choice of their own, were taken captive and sold into slavery by their own people, and brought in chains to foreign lands, as the property of other men. Those who survived the rough and merciless sea voyages had their homes, their families, their identities, and their cultures stripped away from them. It is under such circumstances that these slaves came to take on the surface rituals of Catholicism, which were forced upon them, whilst maintaining their own faith and culture beneath the disguise. I cannot say I blame them! Here's one example of how this happened in Brazil:

"In Brazil, syncretism is an old phenomenon, for from the beginning of colonization we find it in the quilombo dos Palmares (hiding place of fugitive slaves) . . . We find it in Cuba, in Haiti, in the same form as in Brazil."

"Arriving in Brazil, the blacks were catechized in a vague way, were, at least, baptized. However, they understood nothing of that religion which was forcibly taught to them."

"Catholicism changed into . . . a way of disguising traditional beliefs: in reality, the Catholic saint was not worshiped, but rather the corresponding orixá [African deity] behind it. Catholicism became merely a front to hide a secret ritual. . . . In the syncretism, Christianity furnishes only the Portuguese words; all else is fetishism." \*

If you don't mind reading repeatedly about animals (especially black cats, black cocks, snakes, etc.) being mutilated, skinned alive, or bound and boiled alive to satisfy the appetites of dark and hungry gods, then you might enjoy this book. I started reading it for a particular reason involving one of my own ancestors who, despite descending from a long line of French Catholics, was known to practise small, private Voodoo rituals on a daily basis. Like many of my ancestors, she'd spent most of her life in Louisiana. In her old age, she clung tightly to her bag of gris-gris, constantly muttering over it whilst fingering its contents. No one else was allowed to touch it, though the children of course tried. My family members who witnessed this activity never knew whether she was invoking protection for herself or a casting a curse on someone else, so they did not try to interfere. She also consulted with a local priestess, often bringing a live chicken along. The chickens were never heard from again.

\* From historian Roger Bastide's *Contribuição ao Estudo do Sincretismo Católico-Fetichista*.

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### **(shan) Littlebookcove says**

Well...

It took me a while to get though this if I'm honest. But it was a really interesting read. I got this at hex Shop while in New Orleans This was the other book I picked up along with Queen of voodoo. while I was travelling around USA.

I found this book to be really interesting.. loads of little spells You can pick up in this book.if that's your thing. The author wrote this book in 1940's. Whether Some of this history is true or not, It was a interesting read. It's almost like he tracked the People who he writes about down and interviewed them. So this is about new Orleans voodoo from inside new Orleans it's self. I personally loved how Voodoo is not about how expensive Items are and how raw and tribal it is they have so many gods and goddess's and saints.

all in all a really interesting read and i book i shall treasure with memories of the good old Nola <3

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### **Sharon says**

This is an interesting little book, originally published in 1946. Author Robert Tallant relied on first-person interviews, as well as files from the Louisiana Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration (during the Great Depression) in order to examine Voodoo as a religion.

The book suffers a little bit from the racial prejudices of the time (Tallant often refers to people of color as "simple" or "ignorant"), but it is otherwise an interesting first-hand look at a culture that is still in practice in modern times.

This would be a good historical primer for someone who does not know much about Voodoo, but I would also recommend speaking with practitioners in modern times (they are readily available at numerous places in New Orleans, for instance) to ask questions about current thought.

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### **James says**

It was a fun and campy read. Previous books on the topics indicate that you should take it with a rather large grain of salt, but I enjoyed it none the less. Interesting to find out it was a works-progress book, same as some stuff that Zora Neale Hurston did.

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### **Lynelle says**

Full of nonsense, largely made up - but quite entertaining

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### **Kristina says**

Fair warning: 1946 is when this book was first published, so the words "Negro" and "Negress" can be found and heavily used throughout this book. (There are no negative connotations; it's just the language of the time period.) Nevertheless, it was such an interesting read, delving into the stories and tales that surround superstition of an age old religion and how it came to New Orleans/America. Colorful retelling of Voodoo/Hoodoo practices and experiences make each anecdote come alive despite the lack of citations or backgrounds of any of the people mentioned.

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### **StellaDow says**

A product of its time, but the hearsay accounts are interesting, just to get an idea of how the practices pervaded everyday life

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### **Renie says**

Written in the style of the day so don't get shocked at how everyone is listed by their ethnic makeup. Touted as truth but really a narrow viewpoint from an outsider. Quick interesting primer read full of hearsay and scraps of evidence.

Regardless kudos to the author for taking the subject seriously, for even doing research in a world that is not his own. For trying to create a written history in a space where tradition mandates all information secret and imparted in only an oral fashion.

In the end he was given the same smoke screens as those who came before him.

As always it is grating to read about the massive thoughtless cultural appropriation of marginalized peoples.

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### **Geneva says**

An interesting read, but he's no Zora.

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### **Mason Jones says**

This is probably more like a 2.5 star book, but three it is. Written in the 1940s, it is certainly of its time, though pretty enlightened all things considered. There's a lot of judgment based on both race and educational level, but being 70 years old it's not surprising. Despite that, there's some interesting history here, and a pretty level-headed analysis of stories and tales told. It's supposedly one of the better overviews, though it seems like too much of an outsider's view to be more than an entertaining collection of stories. Worth reading if you're curious about some of the characters and places from Voodoo's past, but don't expect too much.

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### **Gillik says**

A strange, charmingly racist little book (she says with sarcasm). It's very much a product of the time - all the (poor, black) characters sound the same, and the author handles the subject not from journalistic remove but from a 'look what these silly savage folks get up to!' mindset.

That being said, it's fascinating, even just as a primer into What White People Thought Voodoo Was Like. Lists of curses, depictions of ceremonies, details on voodoo queens and their various rivalries and scandals. A deep expose into voodoo's history it ain't - but it's colorful and full of character.

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### **Christoph says**

I purchased this book looking for a quick read that explains the various beliefs and customs of New Orleans Voodoo. I was curious to compare and contrast it with Haitian Voodoo. However, this book is more a picture of what white men in the 1940s believed voodoo to be. Multiple unverified and unreferenced anecdotes, misuse of some very basic voodoo concepts, downright fabrications about basic beliefs (for example, multiple references to voodoo being a form of devil worship, naked orgies, black magic, curses, witch doctors, conflation of hoodoo with voodoo, bewilderment at voodooists practicing catholicism, and absolutely zero references to the loa, their veves, etc).

In the end, I gave it two stars because the book was somewhat interesting in the way of understanding how voodoo was (and likely still is) perceived amongst outsiders. I think it sits today as a case example for why voodoo tends to be a very secretive belief structure. However, don't expect to gain any understanding of their actual beliefs, customs, or history through this book.

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