An American Tradition

Individualism, Secularization and Magic in New Orleans

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Abstract:

In this master`s thesis I seek to understand the magical and religious practice in contemporary United States of America. To do this I studied the practice of Voodoo in New Orleans. I wanted to see how a tradition focused on magic and Afro-Caribbean mythology can survive and be practiced in a modern society as contemporary New Orleans. The questions I am raising are how magic and spiritual religion can correlate with modernity and individualism, and if the practices are formed by the traditions or by the greater society. The fieldwork was conducted January to June 2015. The focus will be on reality construction and how the practitioners understand themselves and their function in this reality, as they live in a society formed by disenchantment and Individualism. The claim of this paper is that the traditions are formed by the values of the greater society, that voodoo is used to express individualistic values and an individualistic understanding of the individuals place in the universe. Formed by America, expressed through voodoo, An American Tradition.
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# Table of Contents

**The City of the Dead** .................................................................................................................. 6
**Delta Blues** ............................................................................................................................... 6
**The Abysmal Waters** ............................................................................................................... 7
**Going With the Flow** ................................................................................................................. 8
**Spiritual People** ........................................................................................................................ 9
**Voodoo and Vodou** .................................................................................................................. 10
**Haitian Vodou** .......................................................................................................................... 10
**New Orleans Voodoo** ............................................................................................................... 12
**Magic People** ........................................................................................................................... 12
**Research Question and Topic** ................................................................................................ 12
**Outline of the Thesis** ............................................................................................................... 13
**The Ethnographer** .................................................................................................................... 14
**The Participating Observer** .................................................................................................... 16
**Ethical Considerations** .......................................................................................................... 18

**Religion, Individualism and Modernity** .................................................................................. 20
**Cowboy Mentality** .................................................................................................................. 22
**God Bless America?** .............................................................................................................. 23
**Modernity** ............................................................................................................................... 25
**Social Imaginary** ..................................................................................................................... 28
**Nothing is sacred?** ................................................................................................................... 30
**Finding meaning** ...................................................................................................................... 32
**Rise of the Mystic** .................................................................................................................... 37
**The Cultic Milieu** ..................................................................................................................... 38
**Cultic Reality** ............................................................................................................................ 39

**Voodoo People** ....................................................................................................................... 42
**La Louisiane** ............................................................................................................................. 42
**Gods, Masters and Slaves** ....................................................................................................... 43
**Public Enemy** .......................................................................................................................... 44
**The Hole in History** ................................................................................................................ 45
**The Rise of the Black Church** ............................................................................................... 45
**Ghosts of Voodoo** ..................................................................................................................... 46
**The Death of Voodoo?** ............................................................................................................ 47
**A New Wave** ............................................................................................................................. 48
**The City of the Occult** .............................................................................................................. 49
**The Voodoo Scene** ................................................................................................................... 50
**The Milieu** ................................................................................................................................ 51
**The shop** .................................................................................................................................. 52
**Voodoo business** ...................................................................................................................... 54
**The botanica** ............................................................................................................................ 56
**The Hounfo** .............................................................................................................................. 57
**Voodoo Expression** .................................................................................................................. 58

**The Searchers** .......................................................................................................................... 60
**Freedom of Experience** ........................................................................................................... 60
**Beginning the Journey** ........................................................................................................... 63
**The construction of reality** ....................................................................................................... 69
**The Change of Mind** .............................................................................................................. 72
**The journey** .............................................................................................................................. 74

**Modern Magic** ....................................................................................................................... 76
**The Spiritual Mind** ................................................................................................................... 77
The Good Life ...................................................................................................................... 78
The Will ............................................................................................................................... 78
The Power of Imagination ................................................................................................. 80
Ceremonial Experience ........................................................................................................ 80
Cosmological Principles ..................................................................................................... 81
The Disconnected World .................................................................................................... 82
The Higher Self ................................................................................................................... 86
Spiritual Relationships ........................................................................................................ 87
Universal Streams .............................................................................................................. 88

Concluding Remarks ......................................................................................................... 91

References: ....................................................................................................................... 93
Books: ................................................................................................................................. 93
Articles: .............................................................................................................................. 94
Chapter one

The City of the Dead

Delta Blues
“New Orleans is the city of the dead”, Dr. Glover told me while talking about why Baron Samedi was so fond of this city. We sat in his dim lighted living room in Uptown New Orleans, cemeteries surrounded the complex he lived in. Baron Samedi is the lord of the cemeteries and an Lwa associated with death, and also Dr. Glover’s master of the head, so it was important to him to live close to the burial grounds. Dr. Glover was an elderly black man, former karate instructor and a respected Voodoo Priest in the city of New Orleans. This was the first of two long interviews we had, he was very reflected and had a lot of knowledge and experience about the Voodoo. He was not the first one to call the city that, another priestess had explained how the spirits thrived and moved through the water surrounding New Orleans. Located at the end of the mighty Mississippi and surrounded by the humid swamps of Louisiana, New Orleans had plenty of water for the spirits to move around. The city is located where the Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico, the mud and soil coming down the river ends in a brackish area where salt and freshwater meet, the landscape is thus formed in a shape that resembles the Greek letter D and is hence called a Delta. There are also a lot of
pools and creeks that is formed midst the bogs and marshes, originally called Bayuks by the Chocktaw Indians and now more commonly known as Bayous. The Delta’s swampy ecosystem has a large variety of different life forms, Venomous cottonmouths, alligators and mosquitos creates a very hostile environment for the settler. Mosquitos, for example, are notorious as carriers of Malaria and Yellow fever, which have had outbreaks in the city through its history. The Marshes, pitfalls and quicksand also make it hard for construction and living for the settlements in the area, but the soil is also very nourishing and good for plantations and farming. And there are also edible and tasty animals like crayfish, turtles, shrimps and fish, so there were potentials for creating lasting settlements. But it is the location that is the most valuable asset, it is the natural port of the Mississippi Valley. Being in connection with the Gulf of Mexico, goods can reach ports all around the world. And through the Mississippi it can transport goods into the heart of USA. The Mississippi is also very deep and wide from the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans, so large vessels can reach the city with ease. (Filan 2011, 7-8)

The Abysmal Waters
Following the death of a person his spirit will, according to the Voodoo myths, go to the waters. There the spirit will join other deceased. “Lè Mò” is the dead. They return to through the abysmal waters to Ginen, ancestral home of Vodou, under the sea.” (Glassman; 2007; 75) it was a Manbo Asagwe, a priestess, named Sallie Ann who explained this to me. During our conversations she explained that the abyss water and Guinea is a part of the mysteries, not clear and not a definite concept for the practitioner, but more of a truth to be revealed and a part of universe great mysteries. She understood it both as an idea and a metaphor. As with many of the spiritual concepts, it was a symbol for something bigger that one can`t ultimately grasp, at least not yet. Water is essential to Voodoo, as it is the general understanding that the dead reside in water. The Africans who would later create Vodou came from overseas under horrible conditions on slave ships, so water can be seen as the way back to their spiritual homeland, one practitioner wondered. It is also said that the spirits move faster and more efficient through water.
But it is not so much water, as the idea of something liquid and moving that is important for the practitioners I spent time with, as it is often associated with force and energy. The mighty Mississippi runs through New Orleans, the climate is very humid and the rains flood the streets. Not to mention the catastrophic arrival of Hurricane Katrina and the destruction in its
wake in 2005, water have displayed both its powers and its status as a mighty natural force. And lastly, water is perceived as the giver of life in a scientific sense, as a practitioner told me “water can give life, but it can also take it”.

**Going With the Flow**

“You have to go with the Lwa, go with the flow. Resisting the stream will make you’re life hard, harder than it has to be. So one shouldn’t resist it, on should go with the flow of energies.” Hounsi Alex explained when talking about man in the cosmos. She had an understanding of the flow of things, the universe and all its part working together toward a common goal, and it is an individual’s duty to attune themselves to this flow and work with it, join it toward the common goal. You can go against the flow, its not morally wrong, it just makes things harder, as it will work against you. In a way this implies fighting against your self. Like water, energy flows and is a force of change. Energy is what everything consists of, and magic is by Vodou practitioners actually understood as the manipulation of energies, changing the way of its flow so it may go in the practitioners favor. It is not something concrete, it is fluid and thus shapeless, seeping in everywhere. To connect spiritually is to dip into the energies, draw it from the pools of the universe. “It’s like diving into an ocean. When feeling the ecstatic experience of ritual, its like the consciousness expands and connects with the flows of energy” was how a Hounsi phrased it to help me get a better picture. Dr.Glover told me with reference to his African heritage that Vodou and the African spirits flowed through his blood. It was in his DNA, flowing through him. Its also through blood one feed the Spirit with life force, called Ashe, which is found in animal blood. Other liquids as rum, oils and sanctified water are used in ritual settings, either as to fuel the energies or clean the ritual space. As I pointed out earlier, it is the characteristics of water that fits very well with not just the practitioners understanding of the mechanics of cosmos, but also the practice itself. Like a river, the practitioner is in constant movement, going with the streams of life, trying to find the ways of least resistance toward its final mysterious destination. Its important to notice that I used the plural version of stream, because every practitioner conceived themselves as going their own way, they are their own river. A road is conceptually a path you can go back and forth, the river always moves forward, closer to its destination. Movement forward is important for the practitioner, they believe they are on a quest for self-discovery and realization, thus stagnation means that their path is obstructed and thus keeping them from
reaching their destination. The destination is not defined, but it’s there somewhere in the horizon.

Being fluid or like liquid is a good description of the individualistic practitioner, as they want to be flexible, less rigid, and free to explore. They want to be free to define themselves and define their own world, their own truth. Like a newly formed river they move through the terrain and taking with them parts of what they encounter, these parts are usually religious and spiritual elements. These parts become parts of the flow of the river, both shaping the river’s character, but are also molded themselves by the river. Sometimes the river joins other rivers, or it’s assembles in a pond or lake, thus briefly slowing down, before resuming its predetermined path. This is of course a metaphor, and thus does not correspond completely with reality. But describing this type of religious practice through this metaphor gives a good picture of how the practitioner moves in the religious landscape. Pond or lakes can be seen as pools of knowledge, as Colin Campbell describes it. He writes about the cultic milieu as a vast pool of knowledge, containing deviant and cultic practices, worldviews and ideas. I will elaborate about the milieu later in my paper (Campbell 1972, 122-123).

**Spiritual People**

When reading Sabina Maglioccos Monograph “Witching Culture”(2004) about Wiccans and Pagans in California, I recognized the same religious behavior among her informants as I had observed among the practitioners I encountered during my own research, along a lot of the same ideas and concepts. I studied Practitioners of Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo, but the practitioners I encountered usually had experience with paganism, Wicca or other alternative religious traditions either as an interest or as a practitioner. So the resemblance with Magliocos practitioners did not come as a shock for me, but just strengthened my suspicion I had about the practitioner’s relation to religious practice. They are very pragmatic and individualistic, almost rapacious in the exercise of their religious practice. They may identify as practitioners of Voodoo now, but their practice and beliefs are constructed with elements from a range of different ideas, religions and traditions. Like a river they have gone through life practicing, reading and experiencing and thus taken with them what they found fitting for their practice. They are to a great deal creating their own practice, as sort of own ontology. One who practice voodoo, can simultaneously practice ceremonial
magic\textsuperscript{1}, follow Santeria\textsuperscript{2} and be a Christian, they can construct their religious identity in the way they want. The religious networks these practitioners are part of allows this, often actively encouraging it. And since this is also occurring in other traditions, and people are moving very freely among the traditions, it seems like there is a certain attitude towards religious practice.

**Voodoo and Vodou**
The two main traditions I engaged in New Orleans were Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo. The spelling is important, because some of the practitioners identifying with the Haitian tradition meant that Voodoo was the American, sensationalist spelling and was related to the spelling of Hoodoo\textsuperscript{3}. Thus I will in my paper when writing Vodou point to the Haitian tradition and New Orleans Voodoo when pointing to the New Orleans Tradition, and use Voodoo as a more general term.

**Haitian Vodou**
Alfred Metraux writes that Vodou in Haiti started with the first slaves arriving on the Island of St.dominigue. (Metraux 1989, 25) The slaves came from various ethnic groups, being forced together they started to combine their respective traditions to build up a new syncretic religion.\textsuperscript{(Metraux 1989, 29)} For the slaves the cults of spirits, gods and magic became an escape and an act of resistance. Most of these slaves came from the gulf of Benin, meaning slaves from Congo, Angola, Senegal, Guinea and many from Dahomey and Nigeria. In the Fon language, spoken in Dahomey and Togo,”Voodoo” is a god, spirit or sacred object, what we in Europe calls a fetish. The priest is called Hungan, which means “master of the God” and the servants of the divinity is called Hunsis, which mean “spouse of divinity”. The most important of the voodoo divinities belongs to the Fon and Youruba. The divinities is called Loa in Haiti, and one can find divinities from Congo, and other parts of Africa, actually the Loa’s are classified after the tribe or region it originated from, with the Fon and Youruba divinities at top. But the structure and spirit of Voodoo is essentially Dahomean. Also the religious objects used have kept their Dahomean names: Asson-sacred rattle, Govi-Pitchers, Zin-Pot, Azein-holy emblem, hunto-drum an etc.

\textsuperscript{1} Western esoteric Magical practice
\textsuperscript{2} Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion
\textsuperscript{3} American folkmagic/conjuring.
Temples, sophisticated dances and rhythms, complex rituals and organized clergy characterize the practice of Vodou in Haiti. And the attachment to ones god was measured by the energy they dedicated to them (Metraux 1989, 27-33). The African cults also rapidly intermingled many catholic elements that they got from their slave masters.

The Haitian Vodou theology is a product of traditional African attitudes to gods and spirits mixed with the teaching of the Catholic Church. There is one all encompassing God, but he is distant and not feared or given much thought. Loa are supernatural beings similar to angels, but they revolted. But they are created by God to be in use of mankind (Metraux 1989, 82-83). The root of the classification for Loa is Rada and Petro, And the afore mentioned nations is divided between the two categories. Rada and Petro has very distinct and different ritual, as they have different rhythms, dances and etc. The Rada Loa is usually Dahomean and Petro from other regions. The Rada is perceived as more gentle spirits, the Petro are ferocious and aggressive, they have most skill with magic and thus they are met with skepticism (Metraux 1989, 86-88).

The Loa communicate with their worshippers through dreams or appearing in human form, they also come down to possess one during rituals, thus the possessed one function as the mouthpiece of the Loa. The possession is one of the fundamental elements of Vodou practice and Metraux describes it as the one getting possessed goes into a mystic trance. It is the Loas personality that is expressed through the body during possession, this is shown through the play of his features. The Haitian sees the act of possession as a rider mounting a horse, the act is thus called mounting and the one getting possessed is called a horse (Metraux 1989, 120).

Many of the practitioners I engaged in my fieldwork had been initiated in Haiti or identified as a practitioner of Haitian Vodou. The one Manbo working in the French Quarter shop was a part of a Haitian house centered in New York, she had been initiated in Haiti and was one of those I talked to who was closest to the Haitian tradition. She claims that her practice is almost identical to the Haitian tradition, but since the house was in New York, she had to do a lot of it her self. The Voodoo house I participated in was a part of a Vodou societe in Haiti and was established with an Haitian Houngan, but after the Earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010, the temple and the congregation in Haiti did not survive. Thus the house in New Orleans is on its own and now practices their own thing, but they are still greatly inspired by Haitian Vodou. many of the concept and ideas that Metraux explains is very present in New Orleans.
The Clergy titles is there, it is the Lwa(Loa) they engage with and a lot of the tools, rituals and ceremonies are direct interpretations of the Haitian Tradition.

**New Orleans Voodoo**
The New Orleans Voodoo is much less structured and unified, for reasons that will be explained in chapter three, the practice is very pragmatic and individualistic. It is loosely based on Haitian Vodou, where it borrows a lot of ideas and elements. They too serve the Lwa, but also the African *Orishas*. The ritual setting is described as freeform and improvisational, and so is their practice. The names of the clergy are many, but the most often used is priest, priestess, doctor and mother. Since the tradition of Haitian Vodou is still practiced in Haiti, the practitioners of Haitian Vodou often look to them for legitimacy and authentication. New Orleans Voodoo lack this, and thus the practitioner is free to define his own practice and what Voodoo is, making the term incredibly general. But the understanding I have gained in New Orleans, is that New Orleans Voodoo is generally a spiritual practice based around mythology, religious symbols and elements derived mainly from African and Afro-Caribbean religious traditions. Where the worshipping of the Orisha4, Lwa and the Saints is in the center.

**Magic People**
What practitioners of both traditions shared was a religious practice that was perceived as essentially spiritual, pragmatic and individualistic. The focus of their practice was also centered around life here and now, and they had the possibility and opportunity to use magic to gain control over this life. Through their practice they have entered a world where spirits and magic exists and are essential mechanisms for the universe, alongside the main society formed by rationalism and science, all creating a whole that constitute the reality they live in.

**Research Question and Topic**
In my thesis I seek to understand magical and religious practice in contemporary United States of America, so I studied the practice of Voodoo in New Orleans. I want to see how a tradition focused on magic and Afro-Caribbean mythology can survive and be practiced in a modern society as contemporary New Orleans. The questions I am raising are how magic and spiritual religion can correlate with modernity and individualism, and if the practices are formed by the traditions or an attitude formed by the greater society.

4 Yoruba inspired gods (Matory 2005,171)
I will focus on reality construction and how the practitioners understand themselves and their function in this reality. I will also look at how they perceive the religious elements in their practice in relation to these questions, and also how they express their practices, ontology and values. The claim of this paper is that the traditions are formed by the values of the greater society, the social imaginary, that it is not an expression of voodoo in this sense, but that voodoo is used to express individualistic values and an individualistic understanding of the individuals place in the universe. Formed by America, expressed through voodoo, An American Tradition.

Voodoo terminology is written in the form I was presented by the practitioners I met in the field, also the understanding and usage of the religious tools and elements reflects the practitioners I encountered in New Orleans, not voodoo or vodou as a whole, as this usually differs from house to house, practitioner to practitioner.

Outline of the Thesis
In Chapter two I will use Alex De Tocqueville and Robert N. Bellah to describe the historical and contemporary influences of individualism on religion in American Society, as I believe that this is crucial to understand the social context of the religious practices I have encountered. I will then use mainly Max Weber, William Swatos Jr and Richard Jenkins to discuss Modernity, the disenchantment of the world and secularization, to describe the retreat of religion in public space that have made room for more private and pragmatic religions to rise. Then I will discuss Religion according to Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz and Edmund Leach and discuss if the practices of New Orleans fit in the religious terms of anthropology and the social sciences. as magic is a big part of the practices I have studied I will use Sabina Magliocco to discuss these in relation to the history of the social sciences and also its important part in the spiritual practices. I will end the chapter with partridge discussing the emergence of the new religious practices in the secularized societies, the cultic milieu and occultic religions. The Chapter will create the theoretical framework I will build my paper and argument on.

In chapter three I will present a brief summary of the religious history of Louisiana and New Orleans. One must know the past to understand the present, so this part will create a historical
context to the practices of today. I will then present the social field of the practitioners, introducing the shops and places of the ceremonies. This chapter will have more focus on the social arenas for the practitioners than the practitioners themselves, the use of social space reveals a lot of the flow of knowledge and also the movement of the practitioners. It also reveals social structures that builds the practitioners network.

In Chapter four the focus will be on the practitioners, I will give brief biographies of some of the practitioners to see correlations and differences. This is important to understand the persons that are practicing, why they chose this practice and how they perceive themselves in the universe. I will also discuss the metaphor of the journey, as you will see that most of the practitioners understand themselves on being on a spiritual quest. I will here use Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann to discuss how they construct the reality they live in, because it became very clear to me that the construction of their own reality was a big part of their religious practice. This was important for them, as they are very pragmatic and individualistic.

In Chapter five I will discuss the practitioners use of magic and their relationship with the spirits. I hope to explain how they perceive their role in the universe according to their reality, and how they understand their function in it. I will discuss the relationship between the practices and individualism, and try to find out if they are complementary or conflicting. This will also be crucial for my research question, as I will try to discover if the attitude and behavior of the practitioner is correlating with the concepts of individualism.

The Ethnographer
I arrived in New Orleans in the middle of January 2015, and would go on to spend almost 6 months there doing ethnographic fieldwork. The plan had originally been to do research on the Spiritual Churches in New Orleans and since I had not established contact with any one, I used my first week to search the Internet and walk around in the city trying to find a church to start my fieldwork. I also sent e-mails to anthropologists who had studied these Churches. Sadly, this project proved futile. I could not find any of the characteristic churches of New Orleans and neither could anyone I met with tell me where the churches were, or if they even existed anymore. Then one day I received an e-mail from one of the anthropologists I’ve been in contact with who confirmed my suspicion, the churches were not there anymore. He told me that their affiliation had grown weaker and weaker after his fieldwork back in the 1970’s.
They had failed to recruit youth, and then following the hurricane Katrina many of the old people in the congregation were relocated to other parts of the state, often leading to them breaking with the church. The rest of the congregation followed a rising trend and joined the bigger and more organized churches, so when I arrived there the spiritual churches was not there anymore, especially not to in the sense I had hoped.

Feeling a bit defeated and desperate I talked to Wayne, my landlord of the time, he sat in the living room and read Joseph Campbell’s “primitive mythology”. We started to talk about religious practices, leading us to talk about Voodoo. When I said that I have heard that it was not practiced anymore Wayne revealed that one of his friends was in New York at the moment to be initiated into a Voodoo House. Ironically, it was Voodoo I had thought hardly existed anymore, but now the tables had turned and I decided to contact his friend when she came back to New Orleans. In the meantime I would try to find the Voodoo practitioners of New Orleans.

Through Internet I found two spiritual shops that looked promising, one located in the French quarter, the other was located in the Marigny district and called itself a Botanica. I began with a visit to the shops, to make a good first impression, but also because I thought I would easier gain the trust from the practitioners this way. Both shops, luckily, had practitioners working there and since they were working in a shop the average Joe would call exotic, they were quite used to outsiders coming in and asking questions. I introduced myself as a student of social anthropology and explained to them the project I was working on and my research methods. They kindly answered my questions and even said I could stop by whenever they were working to have a chat. In the French quarter shop I regularly visited two practitioners around once a week, and in the other shop I visited one practitioner. Before the initial conversations I usually prepared a few questions to get the conversation going, but it was not a structured interview and after the introductory questions the following conversation was very informal. I refrained from using a tape-recorded during our conversations, as the shops was visited by customers and it would be very tiresome to ask everyone if they agreed to be recorded on tape. Since the practitioners where working it would have been a lot of pauses, and more importantly, it would also make the visits unnecessarily formal, which I wanted to avoid as my aim was to get to know them more intimately. I visited them during their working hours regularly through my stay in New Orleans, and I soon realized how beneficial it was to be able to observe them working. Since I could observe how they interacted with the customers, I saw how they presented the traditions to outsiders. I also had lots of time to study
the décor and products of the shops, which gave me a fairly good insight into how they wanted to be portrayed, and what objects that were sold to the different types customers.

The Participating Observer

The one practitioner working in the Botanica was a part of a Vodou house, and the head priestess of the Vodou house happened to be his boss. I visited the shop a day she was working to introduce myself, and she promptly invited me to join their ceremonies which were conducted at Saturdays. Before the ceremonies, my main source of data had been the conversations with the practitioners and observations of them working, but when I attended the ceremonies participation became crucial to get access. They had given me permission to attend their events and it was thus expected that I dedicated myself to the ceremony as well. Even though I was never initiated and was very clear that my main interest in Voodoo was academic, they treated me as a member of the choir. Thus I was invited to join choir practices every Thursday, where myself and members of the Vodou house would practice the songs and dances. It was also where the decision about whom they would dedicate the next ceremony to was elected. Under these discussions I held a low profile. I did not engage much in those conversations but focused on what the practitioners said and how they interacted, although if I had questions I would ask them when natural pauses occurred.

It was when I was with the house I felt like a “real” anthropologist as I now was doing participant observation. Fortunately, some of them had studied anthropology and most of the practitioner had a good understanding of what anthropology was. Thus there was no need to explain my role as an anthropologist, but that meant they also had their own perception of my role and also expectations. Thus some were very keen to start discussing Vodou with me in an anthropological fashion. I also think that they did not see me as open for practicing the spiritual practices myself, and they thus discussed these themes in a more rational way, more scientific. To a distinct this was true, since I was not converted in any way by my stay, but it would have be interesting to have experienced how they behaved against a person they were hoping for would join their ranks.

When it comes to the experience, attending the ceremonies gave me the opportunity to experience the ceremony on my body. I danced and sang, felt the beat of the drum. I became a part of the choir. I felt responsibility to take it seriously, even though I had some problems with letting myself go, and try my best to contribute to the atmosphere. I was well aware of that if I destroyed the atmosphere, the practitioners would miss out on the experience they
sought, thus I ran the risk of becoming a problem for them. So I was very aware of my behavior as to not influence the atmosphere in a way that would ruin the experience. And of course, I remained respectful concerning their practices: Personally I didn’t find it hard taking them seriously, but as I know they are stigmatized in the general society, so I treaded with extra care.

I took some time to get to know the other members of the choir better before I asked them if I could interview them, the reason for this was that I wanted to acquire a general understanding of the practice first, while also hoping that the interview would be more personal and intimate if they trusted me more. So a part from the practitioner I had talked to regularly, I started to interview and have conversations with the other practitioners during the last third of my fieldwork. The interviews where usually conducted in a café, thus removing them from the setting of the shops or temple, creating a more intimate atmosphere. Some practitioners felt it was easier to talk about themselves in this setting, especially those working in the French quarter shop, because they did not represent their shop in their free time. The interviews ranged from one to three hours. With the exception of three of the practitioners which I had two interviews with, the others where interviewed only once. An audio recorder and notebook where used during these interviews, and the questions focused on the practitioner and not Voodoo in general. These interviews were of course supplemented with more informal chats I had with the practitioners both before and after.

I also attended three public ceremonies with the voodoo house. The first ceremony was held at an annual music festival for sacred music. The other two ceremonies where arranged in occasion with St. Johns Eve, which according to the legends, is the night Marie Levau held her most legendary voodoo ceremonies. The first ceremony was held at a hotel lobby in New Orleans, upon the invitation from the hotel owner. He actually invites them to hold this ceremony every year, and even hired Sallie Ann to cleanse his hotel. The last one was held at a bridge in Bayou St. John in Mid-City New Orleans, this to honor the legacy of Marie Levau which tells of her conducting rituals in the bayou.

The ceremonies gave me good insight in how they presented their practice to the general public, and which rituals they saw as most important to communicate, and how they engaged the public. It was also interesting to listen to what the practitioner said about the events afterwards, how did they perceive them and what experience they have had made. I did not interview any of the spectators under the ceremonies, nor did I interview anyone outside the spiritual milieu of New Orleans.
The data I have collected during my fieldwork is primarily based on the conversations I had with the practitioners, I have less empirical data on the practices, with the exception of the ceremonies I have participated with together with the house, I did very little observation on the private practices, and when it comes to practitioners outside the house I have almost no empirical data on their practices. This because I did not get access to this part of their life, the contexts I met them in where usually public, and I did not get an invitation to enter their private sphere. As one of the practitioners told me, the Americans are like shotgun Houses. Shotgun houses have rooms arranged one behind the other and doors at each end of the house. And he told me the Americans are welcoming and kind people, but usually you are only allowed to enter into the hallway, if you are lucky you get to enter their living room. But you have to be real close to them if they are to show you the kitchen and bedrooms, and it is there the skeletons are. So my paper will focus on how they talk and resonate around their practice, and it will thus mainly be an analytical study of their discourse and the presentation of their ontology. I am well aware that a weakness in my data is that their private sphere remained inaccessible for me This mean I have not seen the practices I have been explained in action, nor do I have much data on their religious behavior in their daily life. So I will rather analyze the ideas and thoughts about their religious engagement and practice. Even though I attended a lot of ceremonies with the house, I will not focus too much on the ritual actions. The reason for this is that I perceived the ceremonies as a tool for creating an atmosphere for individual interpretation, with this I mean, that the ceremony is intended to ignite the imagination and emotions in the practitioner, so each individual’s imagination could unfold in it’s own way. Therefore I will concentrate on how the ceremonies are perceived by the practitioner. Thus analyzing discourses. This makes it easier to compare it with the data I have on the other practitioners whom I only talked to and did not observe in ritualistic contexts.

**Ethical Considerations**

Since Voodoo practitioners still to an extent feel that they are stigmatized, some of them wanted me to give them pseudonyms in this thesis. Of course, everyone who wanted it is granted anonymity and I will try to describe the practitioner as detailed as I can without giving away his or her identity. This means that I will leave out characteristics that would make it very easy to identify the practitioner. I have also given pseudonyms to others who did not explicitly say they wanted it, making it harder to identify each practitioner. The New
Orleans Voodoo scene is relatively small, the networks easily overlap and if they don’t not know the practitioner, they are aware of their affiliation. And since there are ongoing debates and potential conflicts between practitioners, it is far from my intention to ignite or fuel feuds. As I explained earlier in this chapter, the practitioners are very pragmatic and individualistic, thus what they perceive as truth vary from practitioner to practitioner and can occasionally spark heated arguments.

It would be interesting to discover more around the arguments, but they were reluctant to talk about it, partly because they did not want to start unnecessary conflicts but also because they want to have a more unified community in the future. Also, they knew I talked to other practitioners, and I did not spread information of one practitioner to the others, I was very aware of this. Also, since far from everyone I talked to had jobs in the spiritual business, many wanted to be anonym so it would not affect their career, as they have felt negative responses before in career contexts because of their practice.

People whom were not aware of my role as an anthropologist or my project, will not be a part of this thesis. For example people walking in the stores or the ceremonies, which I have not had the opportunity to explain my research to, will not be used in this paper. I have chosen this out of respect of their private life and also since I did not talk with them I could at best have guessed the context they were operating in. I want to add that Dr. Glover, Sallie Ann Glassmann, Zaar and Brandi is not pseudonyms, they are all people that have been in the media, or are publicly well known. They have much influence on the spiritual milieu of New Orleans and have opinions and characteristics so well known that anonymity did not feel necessary.
Chapter two

Religion, Individualism and Modernity

In every age there is one dominating trait that everything is tied to, the trait is the source to a main idea or main passion which will attract all the other emotions and thoughts. This could be compared to a great river that all the little streams flow towards. This description is taken from Alexis De Tocqueville, whom in 1831 did a study of the Society in the United States and in 1835 released the work “Democracy in America” (Tocqueville 2010, XI-XV). The main trait he found in the United States is that of equality, and the Americans passion for equality was even greater than the passion for freedom, a passion he also highlighted. The ideal they strive for is one were every individual is completely equal, which in turn will mean that every individual will become completely free. All individuals should have access to the same pleasures, occupations and locations, to be able to live in the same way and gain fortune with the same means. But Tocqueville claims that even though they mean that equality and
freedom will empower each other and coincide, these are two different types of ideas are in competition and the idea of equality is the strongest. Equality is what characterizes the age they live in, it characterizes America, thus it is also the characteristic they cherish the most. Freedom gives a limited amount of individuals’ great joy, equality gives many individuals small joys. Thus equality is seen as a noble trait. The characteristics of equality is visible everywhere and is there for everyone, thus everyone is attracted to it and it provokes strong a idea that is deep and general. (Tocqueville 2010, 106-108)

When equality expands in a society, the number of individuals that lack the sufficient fortune or power to have a great influence on their fellow citizens is reduced. According to Tocqueville they owe no one nothing and thus don’t expect nothing from others, they are attuned to live isolated from society and find joy in picturing themselves as the sole contributor to their own fortune. Individualism is a new thought, where their predecessors only knew egoism. Where egoism comes from blind instincts, individualism is a calm reflective way for the individual to isolate themselves from their fellow citizen, thus in a way create their own little society to retreat to while leaving the greater society to itself.

In the age of democracy, the individual’s duty to the human race is more defined, thus devotion to each other becomes rarer as hierarchal order is no longer structuring the society, they are not so much dependent upon one another. The emotional ties between individuals become wider and thus become looser (Tocqueville 2010, 109-111).

Tocqueville further argues that the moral in the United States is now based on the principle of self-interest rightly understood, that is the understanding that acting morally is something that is practical and which serves the individual interest. Moralists do not talk about doing the right thing because that is morally right, but doing the right thing because it is favorable for all parties, everybody gains on it. The understanding is that man serves himself in serving his fellow citizen and that it is in his private interest to do good (Tocqueville 2010, 126-129).

Also in Tocqueville’s discussion about honor in United States he finds that the Americans encourages the pursuit of self-interest. This is evident in his explanation that they encourages what he describes as a lust for riches and all that it entails, as long as it does not breach public peace and order. An honorable man is also one who refuse to break, one who do not let failure get the best of him, but the one who will stay strong and try again, and one who stand alone and manages to stand alone. This deed is the most cherished because if the society is to grow, their inhabitants have to strive for growth, they have to take advantages and risks to prosper, so the whole nation can prosper. In this view one sees that the mentality is that the society is
not stronger than their individuals. But the notion of honor is also loose and abstract in the United States, as Tocqueville explains, with the lack of class and aristocracy in societies, as the one you find in America, the definition of honor will be less detailed and comprehensive, they will also be fewer. The codex of honor will coincide with the general notion of moral and the general publics interests. The codex of honor now represents the distinctiveness of the nation, thus the hard working and unbreakable individual is the icon of the American (Tocqueville 2010, 156-157).

Cowboy Mentality
150 years after the work of Tocqueville, Robert N. Bella and other academics describes tendencies which resembles the one depicted by Tocqueville greatly.

In the American myths of individualism, a recurring character is the hero who must leave society to do the moral good. The American depiction of the cowboy is one of the strongest national myths, the cowboy always saves the community, but he never completely fits in and often leaves town after the completion of the task. And thus his journey continues. It is his characteristics that makes him unique that prohibits him from fully belonging to a society and his significance lies in his unique individual virtue and his special skills that the society needs, Bellah writes that the stories almost imply that you can’t be a truly good person if you join a group. “The self is “the main form of reality.”” (Bellah et al 2008, 143) This quote is Bellah’s and the other writers example of the psychology in the United States, they call it the tenets of modern individualism. The quote implies that you can only know the world through yourself, only you can know what is really true, it is you who are authority of reality.

Individualism is at the core of the American society and its culture. It is the belief in the dignity and sacredness of the individual, the right of the individual to think for itself, judge for itself, make its own decisions and live the life as the individual itself sees fit. Violation of this is not just considered morally wrong in the United States, but even sacrilegious. This ideology is linked to the highest and noblest aspirations in the American society, and what they wish for those they care about, themselves, the society and the world (Bellah et al 2008, 142-143). The behavior and understanding of themselves as individuals, as Bellah portray them, correlates very much with the practitioners of New Orleans. They too are very individualistic and conceive themselves as the center of their own universe, and their spiritual journey as the most important priority. It is also they who are the authority of their spiritual life, deciding what is the right practice for themselves and also interpret meaning according to their life.
Robert N. Bellah and the other writers defines individualism as described above in their book “Habits of the Heart”, but they also present a second definition:

“A belief that the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct, a view we call ontological individualism. This view is shared by utilitarian and expressive individualists. It is opposed to the view that society is as real as individuals, a view we call social realism, which is common to the biblical and republican traditions.” (Bellah et al 2008, 334)

So in this ideology, it is the individual who has the authority to define reality according to itself, everything else is artificial and thus given a lower ranking in the individual’s ontological hierarchy. They construct their own world, since this is both the individual’s right and obligation. For the individualist it is the individual is what is real, it is closest to a concrete truth for the individual.

Bellah writes that individual freedom is a deeply held American value, it defines their perception of a good life. This freedom is the freedom to define who you are yourself, deciding what you want in life and also freedom from conformity, the freedom to not have to be like the others. To be free psychologically is to successfully separate oneself from the imposed values from ones past or not to conform with its social milieu, this is considered important for the discovery of what one really want in life (Bellah et al 2008, 23-24). It is only through relying on yourself, believing in your self and your integrity as a independent individual, that you can find yourself, your true self.

The American myths portrays a world where individuals only are valuable to society if they are completely autonomous and thus stands outside of society. In this scenario there is a heroic selfishness, it is accepting the necessity of remaining alone to serve the values of the group. Individual integrity and self-reliance is important characteristics of an individual, thus being the values one should cherish to become a good person (Bellah et al 2008, 146).

God Bless America?
The colonists in the new world had fled from an oppressing religious establishment and where now seeking religious freedom. After the American Revolution, it was the dissented sects and influential individuals inspired by the Enlightenment that manage to separate religion from the state in the young republic. Religious change accompanied the social change and now put more emphasis on the individual and the voluntary association. Religious membership was not unifying like before, the religious communities had become highly segmented and a
sharper distinction between spheres in society emerged, especially between the religious and secular spheres. Churches were no longer made up of a single community, it was now an assembly of likeminded individuals. (Bella et al 2008, 223).

The American pattern of privatizing became very compatible with the religious pluralism in the society, and the diversity of practice was seen as legitimate. Religion was perceived as an individual choice with the implication that the practice is in accord with the rest of the society and its moral standards. But religious individualism is far from new in the United States and there are examples from as early as the seventeenth century about how having a personal religious experience was a prerequisite for acceptance as a member in some churches. Individuals thus had the opportunity to find the form of religion that suited their inclinations as early as the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century they had to compete against each, where the individuals religious taste decided if there would be growth or decline.

Religious individualism was not contained in just the churches, prominent and influential characters in American society had a very individualistic understanding of their own religious practice. Thomas Jefferson once said “I am a sect myself”(Jefferson in Bellah et al 2008, 233) and Thomas paine “my mind is my church”(Paine in Bellah et al 2008, 233). Clearly placing the religious authority and practice onto themselves, many of these figures did not find their home in one distinct religious tradition, but were attracted to the religious teachings of many as well as being attracted to a vague pantheistic mysticism that tended to identify the divine with a higher self (Bellah et al 2008, 233).

Ernst Troeltsch calls religious individualism mysticism, mysticism is focusing on the individual’s spiritual discipline. Religious organization in mysticism is more casual and transient, as it is inessential. The primary importance is the person itself, not the community. Even though mysticism is not new in America, it has developed into a major form in the late twentieth century (Bellah et al 2008, 243-246). Religious individualists considers themselves as spiritual rather than religious, many of the practitioners I talked to talked about their spirituality and not so much of their religiosity. In their view organized religion was dogmatic, rigid and mind closing.. Spirituality on the other hand was about freedom, movement, mind opening and exciting. They might call their practice a religion, but they define it as a spiritual tradition or a spiritual path, rather than religious life.

Mysticism radicalizes and absolutes individualism and religious individualism is thus appropriate in the American society, and is together with secular individualism here to stay. In the United States individuals have to be strong and independent and as believers they often
have to operate alone in uncongenial circumstances. Bellah believes that many attending churches and sects are really religious individualists. Also many religious individualists have left their sects or church they were raised in, objecting to its perceived authoritanism and paternalism (Bellah et al 2008, 246-247).

**Modernity**
The religions retreat to the private sphere was a trend Max Weber also saw, but for him, the disenchantment of the world, as he called it, was a product of the increasing intellectualization and rationalization fueled by science (Weber 1958, 117). But Max Weber also points out the retreat of religion as a symptom of modernity (Weber 1958, 133), creating a shift of humans’ own understanding of themselves in the world (Weber 1958, 127). In placing us in the center, we are made into the rulers of the universe now, and our agency manipulates the world around us, not the other way around. God is no longer institutionalized in the public sphere; he is not the ruler of societies anymore and his hegemonic influence is thus limited. The rise of science creates a worldview where everything is calculable, there are no mysterious incalculable forces in the universe, everything can potentially be explained in scientific terms. This does not mean that people know more about the conditions they lives under, but that they believe that this knowledge is attainable. The room for magic and mysterious powers are decreasing in our time, Weber explains, this is the disenchantment of the world (Weber 1958, 116-117). But science is also meaningless when it comes to questions past the calculable world, it cannot answer us how to live (Weber 1958, 121).

Now, Richard Jenkins argues that the disenchantment is opposed by re-enchantments. Re-enchantments in Jenkins terms can describe two different approaches, the first is the insisting on the existence of more things in the universe than the rational epistemologies can dream off. This includes long-established or traditional spiritual beliefs, new age or alternative beliefs. The second is rejecting that the calculative, procedural and formal rationality is always the best way (Jenkins 2000, 12-13). As science is not closer to truth than other systems in a sociological sense, Weber describes science as a value system. The tools this system provides can help or force the individual to give themselves an account of the ultimate meaning of their own conduct, bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility over itself (Weber 1958, 130). It is in this sense science is in the service of the moral forces, and becomes a value sphere in its own right. And it is also in this sense it comes in conflict with the other
value spheres, although now you can make a divisive choice, which you could not do in the enchanted world, because people back then did not have these alternatives. As every theology has presuppositions, science has to. So you have to make a value judgment, because these contradict each other, they are in a never-ending conflict. Theology presupposes that world has to have a meaning that certain revelations are facts one need for salvation and therefore must be believed in. It therefore possesses a quality of holiness, which creates a certain way of life that is religiously meaningful. The presuppositions often lies beyond the limits of science, and since these facts have to just be accepted they are not knowledge in the usual sense, it is something a person possess, he possesses faith! Therefore Weber argues that the value sphere of theology and the value sphere of science are unbridgeable (Weber 1958, 130-133).

On the contrary Jenkins argues the ‘irrational’ dimensions of social life can influence even the most rational bureaucracies. Symbolism and myth, notions of fate or luck, sexuality, religion or other ideologies or ethnic sentiments, necessarily influence organizational behavior (Jenkins 2000, 14-15). Examples from my own field are that practitioners would use magic in job hunting, politics and economics, and all other sorts of very mundane matters. They also said that in being spiritual, they act in a more harmonious and deeper way in all aspects of life. Their spirituality and knowledge of the world was influencing all aspects of their life. Jenkins argues that the reason for this irrational influence on the rational is due formal organizations not being insulated containers of rationality (Jenkins 2000. 14).

Jenkins continues and argues against the depiction of disenchantment as the eclipse of a magical and moral universe, because you can’t really defend a view of the past with homogenous and unified beliefs, an “enchanted world” where everybody have the same understanding of the world they live in. Jenkins argues that heresy, skepticism and pluralism were (and still are) present in the European world, making the disenchantment, if understood as a defragmentation of epistemology, a phenomenon you can find in all of recorded history (Jenkins 2000. 15).

So homogenization and heterogenization are both aspects of our world, logically and in everyday life, the one entails the other, forcing us to recognize the complexity of a world that is neither completely disenchanted nor enchanted (Jenkins 2000, 16).

Jenkins thinks of science as a wholly epistemological framework to understand the natural world, it’s hegemonic and authoritative rise after the Enlightenment, and unchallenged position in the nineteenth century, is maybe a historical exception and not a rule, which now
is beginning to crumble. And there is now also an understanding of “normal science” as Jenkins calls it is less rational than one might expect. All this factors brings a growing realization that the ‘objective’ knowledge of western science is at best contingent rather than permanent verities (Jenkins 2000, 17). Actually, Jenkins argue, the world may become more mysterious, but this should not to be understood as an erosion of science, but more as a potential shift towards greater epistemological pluralism. This creates spaces for individuals to create their own explanations to the universe, where they can fill the epistemological holes themselves (Jenkins 2000, 17-18).

The “limitations” of science is something the New Orleans practitioner discussed lively. They see their doctors when they are ill, they believe and recognize modern science, but they also claim that there are more to this world than conventional science can explain and they see it as spirituality and religions job to expand this understanding. They relate to science as the groundwork, building their worldview upon it, recognizing how science describes how the natural world works “mechanically”, but they meant that spirits and God are the ones that drives it, fuels it and maintains it. Where science has reached its explanatory limits, the spirits thrive. For example if one is spiritually sick, the symptoms can be physical, but the remedy has to be spiritual. Indeed Jenkins argues that there is very little evidence of the decline of magic, even though superficially this seems to be the cause. Luck and faith is for example explanatory frameworks, and some that are skeptic to conventional medicine uses unconventional medicine. Religious fundamentalism, alternative lifestyles (some of them explicitly resistant to urban and capitalistic life), alternative religions and psychoanalysis/psychotherapy are examples of other reenchantments and modern products (Jenkins, 2000; 18). Formal and organized religion is indeed experiencing a decline in participation, but this does not mean that religious or spiritual beliefs are diminishing. Secularization and disenchantment is not the same thing, even though they are often confused. There is much evidence that the importance of these beliefs have not decreased and that established Christianity has been supplanted by other spiritual traditions, Jenkins writes (Jenkins, 2000; 19). Indeed, a lot of my informants are still or were Christian by belief and their upbringing, finding Christianity unable to fulfill their spiritual needs, they sought other sources for religious and spiritual experience and commitment.
Social Imaginary
Charles Taylor argues that along with western modernity came a new moral order that have formed the social imaginary of western societies (Taylor 2002, 92). A social imaginary is how ordinary people imagine the social surroundings, it is often shared by a large group of people, even whole societies. It is the common understanding that legitimizes and makes possible common practices (Taylor 2002, 106).

“It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. “(Taylor 2002, 106)

Society is now perceived as individuals coming together to form a political entity based around a moral background, which is the understanding that humans have natural rights and obligations to each other. The normative order has changed from a hierarchical system to one where the mutual respect and mutual service of the individuals makes up the society (Taylor 2002, 93).

But Taylor insists that the rise of individualism is not on the expense of community, it is a change in focus. The change of focus is from the society to the individuals that the society consists of, individuals that are ultimately equal. This is also the trend Tocqueville saw, the importance of equality for the American. The modern principle is that we all are by nature and essence individuals, this is the modern social imaginary (Taylor 2002, 99).

Society is not anymore perceived as God-given or as resembling the natural order anymore, but rather as emanating from reason. This is a radical secularity that is a product of the rise of the public sphere, it is a shift in the perception of what society is grounded in. It is not just the removal of God fom the public space, but it goes against the view of society as a divine foundation, it is not anymore perceived as constituted by something that transcends everyday action. The public sphere is an association constituted by nothing outside common action, it exists through the individuals acting together in this way. It is not understood as a part of a divine framework, Taylor claims it is an agency grounded purely in its own actions, thus it is radically secular. This transformation is in the social imaginary, which now sees society as something that is acted out collectively in contemporary secular time(Taylor 2002, 115-117). The society is now the construction and tool for individuals, the social imaginary is now based on the demand of individual freedom and moral autonomy (Taylor 2002, 123).
For William H. Swatos Jr the societies and cultures in the modern west is disenchanted, making it harder for official religion to propagate, but opens up for experiential religion to grow (Swatos 1983, 332). Now religion is much more a personal connection to a superhuman power, realized in the private sphere. The imaginary is now focused on the individual, not the society (Swatos 1983, 333).

Because of the differentiation, the core institutions have become instruments of technical rationality and are losing their transcendent meanings to individuals. The situation favors a pluralistic competition and the individualistic application of a quasi-scientific falsifiability criterion; it is true if it is true for me (Swatos 1983, 331).

He explains that this is so because the impact enlightenment had on religion was largely unintended and indirect and the enlightenment rationality undermined the hegemony of the religion. Now reason became the expression of the will of God and thus reduced the question of religion to a matter of “personal choice”. Everybody was now a religious authority, leaving the supranational irrelevant to progress. But rationalism was more effective in driving out the irrationalities from formal organizations and structure, failing in eradicating it from people’s consciousness (Swatos 1983, 329). There is a difference between rationalism and empiricism Swatos says, but empirical modern science is nevertheless a direct heir to rationalism and does to an extent fulfill many of its aims. The only authority that can be recognized in modern western culture, he continues, is authority based on empirical or rational demonstration. With the importance of empiricism, experimental religions have found a breeding grown, as they are “experiencing the truth”. This is ironic as rationalism sought to remove the idea of beyond-human-reason (Swatos 1983, 329). This experience of truth and empirical knowledge from spiritual experience is something many of my informants used to legitimize their religion, the legitimacy lies in that if they experienced it, it was real for them. These ideas are not necessarily important, but the feelings they experienced is, if the individual felt a reaction something has to have been there to provoke it. A form of legitimacy has been important for religions up through history but attempts to gain it have always been made difficult because of the irrational foundations of traditional religions. The experimental religions are not either based on rational grounds, but they are “consistent with the empirical spirit of the scientific worldview that rationalism spawned.”(Swatos 1983, 330)

But there are areas of human existence that rational explanation does not have control over, making magic becoming more relevant, even maybe becoming its successor. The move away
from dogmatic and institutionalized religion has the same motivation as the experimental religions, the desire for mastery (Swatos 1983, 330). Swatos cites Luckmann: “in modern society we are faced with a curious reversal. Nature appears to be manageable rather than fateful, [but] the social structure seems to have become unmanageable – a second nature” (Luckmann in Swatos 1983, 330).

This means when it comes to the competition in the meaning systems, values comes short, as value is an abstract idea and often a means in itself, while knowledge comes from rationalism and empiricism, giving it more credibility according to the modern view (Swatos 1983, 322). The affiliation between science and magic becomes the basis for the “return off the sacred”, as the magico-mystical in modernity. This sacred here is discontinuous with the cultural expectations of religion as institution and organization. A process of institutional differentiation has disenchanted the social system. Still personal needs of transcendence and religious experience are obtained by some of the inhabitants from relatively traditional religions symbols and rituals. This “paradoxical” result comes from secularization, which is an effect of disenchantment, is increasing various groups and organizations claim for social authority on religious grounds, making it harder to create a unifying consensus on the locality and meaning of sacred (Swatos 1983, 331).

**Nothing is sacred?**

The confusion of the sacred creates a paradox for the social scientific tradition, as this contradicts Emile Durkheims definition of religious practice. Durkheim claims the world is divided into two distinct spheres, profane and sacred. These are opposing each other and are not connected, nor should they be. Religion structures the society apprehension of reality between the two. The sacred are isolated with taboos and cannot come in contact with the profane (Durkheim 1947, 37). “Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things.” (Durkheim 1947, 37)

These explain the virtues and powers attributed to sacred objects and also the relationship with other sacred things and also in relation to the profane (Durkheim 1947, 37). Durkheim explains that the sacred and the profane are two categories of things that are profoundly different and radically opposed to each other, they are different generas. They are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate, two worlds with nothing in common. Durkheim writes that everything can be sacred, and they are often regarded as superior in dignity and power to the profane, even though this is not the crucial
characterization. There has to be profane things in order that something can be sacred, there is not one without the other. But this distinction fades in the modern context, what is perceived “sacred” for some is profane for the other (Durkheim 1947, 37-41).

It is the individual who is in charge now, and has the authority of definition. It is now understood that the individuals create society, not the other way around. Durkheim notion that man is inferior and depended upon sacred things and is in no way sacred himself, does not fit in this new setting. For Durkheim sacred and profane is at play in two separate worlds that are different in kind, the two worlds are hostile and jealous rivals, when one thing is belonging fully to one, it has fully left the other (Durkheim 1947, 39-40).

Contemporary United States is pluralistic, and there are many worlds, so there is no unifying understanding of sacredness, and it is almost impossible to create any concrete conception of the sacred that will integrate as deeply as Durkheim describes it. He describe the distinction as so strong that even the simplest contact between a sacred thing and the profane is repugnant, the notion of the sacred is always separated by the notion of the profane, because of a logical void between them (Durkheim 1947, 39-40). But this notion is not present on a general level in America, even though it can be privately, it is more important to show a general notion of tolerance and equality in the pluralistic society than to preach distinction, it does not fit with individualism.

For the practitioners the strong sacred and profane dialectic in organizational religion was one of the things many found too rigid and controlling. Some of them found this non-compromising division unreasonable, limiting for the individual, and thus both immoral and evil in individualistic terms. So one could say that the only thing “sacred” to them is the individual it self. Also the pragmatic approach to religious ideas, the variety of sources that differs between the practitioners and the focus on personal experiences and thus subjective meaning makes it hard to create “collective realities”, which Durkheim means is crucial to create religious representations (Durkheim 1947, 10). Without collective realities the members does not become products of collective thought, indeed the practitioners don`t see themselves as a collective, but as a community of individuals, mirroring the social imaginary of their society. They are themselves the center of their own network, which they have the control over. Again the practitioner goes against one of the core elements of Durkheim` understanding of religion, as it is a social unifying reality that the social members will uphold collectively and together (Durkheim 1947, 421-423). Being conformed by the collective, ironically, is the most repugnant thing that could happen to the radical religious individualist.
Finding meaning
For the practitioner the individual is sacred and sacred objects are sacred because the individual perceives it as so. They understand that something perceived as sacred for them may not be perceived likewise by others, thus things are not inherently sacred, but made sacred by the individuals. But they also have an understanding that what they perceive as sacred forms them too, the relationship is dialectic. They seek meaning, and the meaning is created through the sacred symbols. For Clifford Geertz, the function of sacred symbols is to create a people’s ethos and their worldview, their most comprehensive ideas of order. The ethos is reproduced and becomes intellectual reasonable for the people, and thus represents a way of life. It constructs the rules of how the actual state of affairs is in the world projecting a certain image of the world which is very emotionally convincing. The confrontation and mutual confirmation this creates has two fundamental effects, as it objectivizes moral and aesthetic preferences by showing the world as made up by particular structures and that it is imposing certain implicit conditions, making certain behaviors and understandings ‘common sense’ in a unalterable shape of reality. The other fundamental effect of sacred symbols is creating deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experimental evidence for the truth, this is invoked by these received beliefs. Religious symbols create compatibility between a specific metaphysic and a particular style of life, and they sustain each other through borrowed authority of the other (Geertz 2008, 58-59).

The function of sacred symbols correlates well with the practice in New Orleans, and they themselves would resonate with a lot of the ideas. But I will claim that the picture of state of affairs and the creation of common sense is produced by individualism, the sacred symbols may originate from a religious setting, but they are now used to constitute an individualistic reality. As there is a lack of religious institution and religious authority, there is no authority to define the symbols. With this I mean that the practitioners manipulate sacred symbols unconsciously or consciously to represent their worldview, the meaning of the symbol depends on the individual. In this context the sacred symbols are not for a people, but for the people who choose to use them as sacred symbols, they are only relevant if the individual itself experience it as relevant.

Humans seek meaning in the world, and symbols are the building blocks to create a meaningful world. Symbols form the individual’s perception, but the individual also forms the symbols, it’s a dialectical relationship, one which is important to create order from chaos. Seeking meaning leads to an explanation, this explanation shapes a worldview, which again
will be used when analyzing new explanations, and so the process continues (Geertz 2008, 59-61). Since we have seen that individualism has changed religious role in society, individualism have in a way taken the epistemological status that for example Christianity had in medieval time. The individual is in the center and the cultural patterns are now based around more secular ideologies, such as individualism, thus the practice of different religions is similar, it’s essentially just the wrapping that is different, the moods and motivations are essentially the same.

‘Moods’ and ‘Motivations’ is Geertz terms for the two dispositions induced by religious activity. According to him religion shapes it’s worshipper through a distinctive set of dispositions. A disposition describes the probability of an activity being performed or an occurrence occurring in certain circumstances (Geertz 2008, 61-62). For example, to be a healer is not to do acts of healing all the time, but being a person liable to perform them. Motivations are not acts or feelings, but liabilities to perform particular actions or have particular feelings. A religious man is motivated by religion, Christian is for example liable to pray in hard times, while Voodooist on the other hand would rather try to manipulate the situation through magic. A motivation is also a persisting tendency, they give a chronic inclination to perform certain acts and feel certain feelings in certain situations. When the individual is properly stimulated he falls into certain moods. Motivations are made meaningful with reference to the results. The moods are made meaningful with the reference from which they are conceived to spring, from their source. A person is industrious (mood), because he wants to succeed (motivation) (Geertz 2008, 62-63).

I will argue that the mood and the motivations of the practitioner are more based around individualism than a certain theology or religion, indeed, this can explain why they can go from one tradition to another without changing moods and motivations. One may actually say that individualism forms the moods and motivations that provoke the changing of tradition. Being spiritually adventurous, wanting and maybe even needing to experience different traditions and spiritual practices is a mood. The motivation is to find the individual truth and to evolve as a person, to find oneself in the universe, because its there they find the true meaning of themselves, as individuals, Self-realization that is an individualistic deed.

So, in the individualist imaginary the practitioners are not “anchored” externally, but internally. This gives them the opportunity to be very pragmatic, they can move the way they want. Contrary to Durkheim and Geertz who perceives religion as all-encompassing in society, Edmund Leach argues that human as an individual is very pragmatic, and that it uses
social systems in an instrumental way for personal motives (Leach 1986, 10). In secular society the public retreat of religion and the presence of individualism are now creating a social context where the individual is the center and authority, thus readying the grounds for the individual to of create her or his own ontology. But Edmund Leach argues that the pragmatic individual is not something new you only find in western societies.

“After that we became Shans and Buddhists and prospered greatly.” (Leach, 1986 ; 2). The quote is from a witness who first was a part of a Kachin group, but later experienced how his family shifted into a Shan group and thus changed their religious affiliation. This change exemplifies Leaches argument that societies and social systems is not unchangeable or maintained in equilibrium, but that they are open for manipulation and influenced by the individuals in the system (Leach 1986, 5-7). For my thesis, this argument is important, as religion is a social system and that in Leach’s view it’s function is to uphold and form social structures and hierarchy, but it can also be used by individuals to advance in the social hierarchy or gain prestige and esteem (Leach 1986, 8-10). An individual can have status positions in more than one social system at the same time. To the individual itself these systems are alternatives or inconsistencies in the scheme of values by which he or her orders their life. Structural changes come through processes of manipulation of the alternatives by individuals, as a means for social advancement (Leach 1986, 194-195). So for Leach, religion is just another social system, but not more important than any other. Its not more all encompassing in the individuals mind, than other social systems, if not the individuals sees it as such. In this sense Christianity’s status as authoritarian and hegemonic power before modernity was not due to it being a religion, but because it was a social system that was holding this role in the society. Other systems as for example communism and etc can also hold these positions in a society as well, so religion is not special in this sense. Social systems are as the name reveals, social products, and created and used by individuals in social contexts. Even though every individual acts according to their own interests and endeavors, the collectivity of individuals forms the structure of the society they live in. When Leach talk about structural changes, its not just the changes in the positions of individuals with regard to an ideal system of status relationships, but changes in this ideal system itself and its power structure. Power is something an individual holds as social persons, and not necessarily only an attribute of office holders. Gaining power is consciously or unconsciously a very general motive in human affairs, in other words a person acts according to which action that will bring him the most power. Esteem is a cultural product, so gaining esteem and power differs
from society to society, and also between groups in the same society, so how to gain power and esteem can be ambiguous (Leach 1986, 5-10).

The search for power is difficult for me to analyze based on my research data, but if we put it down as individual characteristic, as personal power and personal esteem, I can clearly see that this is resonating with the practitioners I knew. The lack of rigid hierarchy and loose social organization gives the practitioner a lot of power over themselves, and when they to a great extent can define the reality they live in and thus forms the world they live in, this can be very empowering of the individual. It is not so much that they gain greater influence in the society in general, but they experience a sense of gaining more power over their own reality and thus have the power to define themselves and their place in the universe. This also means that they feel power is internal, coming from within and not from outside, as external power can be perceived as more enslaving, like its violating the individual personal freedom.

We have seen now that individualistic religion is blurring the lines between the profane and the sacred, a dichotomy Leach goes against. Social actions have usually been categorized by English social anthropologists as either sacred religious acts or profane technical acts, one of the problems that arises with this classification is magic (Leach 1986, 11). Leach asks if there are special kinds of actions that can be seen as magical acts, and if these acts then belong to the sacred or profane category. Going against Durkheims “two different generas”, Leach argues that an action should not be classified according to its intended ends or which “basic need” it fulfills. He don’t find this absolute dichotomy sufficient, nor that actions fall into place on a continuous scale, where sacred and profane is located at each other’s end. The one extreme being entirely profane actions, which are entirely functional, technique pure and simple. The other extreme would be off course entirely sacred actions, which are strictly aesthetic and technically non functional. The great majority of social actions will end up somewhere between these two, aspects of one extreme in an action will not denote the other but both will almost always be a part of an action (Leach 1986, 11-13).

The practitioner’s use of magic creates a confusion of the sacred, as magic is a spiritual and religious act or remedy they use for very profane or mundane problems, and they also do mundane acts for spiritual purposes, thus fitting Leach’s understanding. Sabina Magliocco claims that magic has been used to refer to both the practice and the belief in magic, without distinction between the two, as well as being portrayed as false and irrational according to the scientific paradigm (Magliocco 2004, 98). She quotes Stanley J. Tambiah “A narrow
yardstick of ‘rationality’ misses the theatrical and illocutionary aspects of ritual performance.” (Tambiah in Magliocco 2004, 98) According to Magliocco Tambiah locates the distinction between religion as faith or belief, versus religion as a practice, including prayer, ritual, spells and magic, in the protestant reformation, he argues that this legacy continues to haunt anthropology. Edward B. Tylor’s unilinear evolutionary schema established the anthropological tradition of separating magic from religion, placing it on the lowest stage and made it a characteristic of the savage. He believed magic to be false and questioned why people still did it when it did not work, his conclusions is still present in anthropology as many anthropologists assumes that magic works psychology like placebo. Afterwards Social scientists like Frazer and Durkheim suggested separating magic from religion, with the later displaying the magician as anti-social and acting against the greater society, contrary to religious person who worked for group solidarity. This tradition of separating magic from religion is still present to this day (Magliocco 2004, 98). Malinowski viewed magic as something humans turned to when their technology reached its limits and the situation was dangerous or risky. He claimed that religion did not function objectively, but subjectively by affecting human witnesses and creating a change in them. Essentially, the last analysis is the one the practitioners think is most true they. Now, many anthropologists are critical of the earlier studies of magic because of their ethnocentric and value-laden terminology, newer research shows that the relationship between religion and magic in most cultures are closely intertwined. But still in the general society, magic is still conceptualized as an irrational and defective technology, which at best only give psychological results (Magliocco 2004, 99). For the practitioners I talked to, magic was perceived as a natural part of the universe, as well as a descriptive tool for their experiences, and also a tool to take more control of their life. The goal of magic was, according to the practitioners, to provoke an emotional or affective reaction to create a change in consciousness. It’s hard to find a single definition of magic, even among its practitioners there is more than one way to perceive what magic is (Magliocco 2008, 101). Some will tend toward the definition made by the magician Aleister Crowley whom described it as “the capacity to alter consciousness at will” (Crowley in Magliocco 2008, 101). As Malinowski’s definition, this view does not require transformation of anything outside of the individual’s consciousness (Magliuco, 2004, 101). Others are more inclined to definitions that opens up for the possibility of effecting changes in external reality, “for them, magic is the ability to harness existing natural forces in conformity with one’s will in order to bring about transformation.” (Magliocco 2004, 101) This potential is natural and not supernatural, many of my informants made a distinction between supernatural and natural
magic, there were a lot of magic you could do that only required “natural ingredients” and/or yourself. “Magic is simply the art of getting results” (Magliocco, 2004; 101), something my own informants would say too, magic is manipulating things into going in a wishful direction, in other words getting favorable results.

But the interesting aspect is that believers of magic are not unified by a common belief or faith, instead they are unified by the experience of magic. Magic is in this sense a universal principle, not a cosmology (Magliocco 2004, 97). The uniting factor is that they can experience this magic, not a formal agreed definition of magic, they have different interpretations of the same mechanism. This is important, as Experience is subjective, I will argue that the creation of a unifying formal reality is near too impossible. Thus concepts like sacred and profane as a reality constructor can’t find any common ground to set it roots. Both the New Orleans voodooist and the pagan share its belief in magic and similar understandings of how it works, but the mythological and symbolic framework it will use to explain it will be different. The framework can even differ between practitioners of the same tradition because of practitioner’s individualistic character, they can agree that magic exists but exactly what it is, is up for individual interpretation.

**Rise of the Mystic**
The practices I encountered in New Orleans are a form of mysticism. I claim this based on the way they engage religious elements and ideas, and the individualistic and pragmatic aspect of their practice which makes this evident. Mysticism has had an upspring in modern society, they are members of different religious groups, the religious group itself does not necessarily have to be mystic, or not engaging others at all in religious matters. Mysticism is not a type of social organization, as it has more emphasis on individualist experience of the divine and direct interior (Partridge 2004, 20-21). Christopher Partridge means that mysticism describes the spirituality in the west very good, as the individual here becomes the center (Partridge 2004, 21-22).

Partridge writes that Ernst Troeltsch described mysticism as being closest to modern thought, “the advantage of mysticism lies in the possibility of taking up elements of freedom and leaving room for the autonomous formation and bond of the conscience. The weakness of mysticism lies in its lack of organization.” (Troeltsch in Partridge 2004, 21)

The mystical impulses are driven by an internalization of religion, here the interior personal experiences replaces exterior doctrine and ethics. Fellowship forms around the sharing of
ideas, but these fellowships lack strong organization and structure. Because of the lack of structure and organization, mystical religions become eclectic and incorporate new ideas (Partridge 2004, 21).

Roy Wallis included another category for religious organization, the cult, which can be interpreted as a development of Troeltsch mystical religion. Like the sect, cults exist in some tension with dominant culture, but the cults are not epistemological exclusivists. They are ‘epistemological individualistic’, not ‘epistemological authoritarian’ because the authority is in the individual (Partridge 2004, 25-26). You can see this clearly in the voodoo house, as there was a hierarchy there, members perceived they as the spiritual authority. They will learn things from their teachers, but they would decide what to incorporate in their practice themselves. There were no sanctions for not obeying the teachings, apart from possible bad blood between the student and the teacher. As the individuals themselves shape the organization of cults, the organization is far looser than the sects. The individuals also decide for themselves what they will believe and not, which fits well into the description of cultic religiosity as they do not claim that they have a unique access to truth (Partridge 2004, 26).

**The Cultic Milieu**

Instead of looking at new religions as a resurgence of religion, they can be understood as evidence for secularization. Partridge argues that the cultic milieu is replacing the deteriorating/secularized Christian culture (Partridge 2004, 40). Colin Campbell describes the cultic milieu as:

> “The cultural underground of society. Much broader, deeper and historically based than the contemporary movement as the underground, it includes all deviant belief-systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs.” (Campbell 1972, 122)

Campbell recognized that ideas often lasts longer than the cults itself, which because of its fragile social control appeared and disappeared quickly. So for the ideas to continue to exist they must be a part of a milieu, he called it the cultic milieu and it includes the worlds of the occult, the magical, spiritualism and other deviant thoughts and traditions (Campbell 1972, 121-122). This milieu and the traditions associated with it believe that a single idea of unity with the divine can be attained by a diversity of paths. Or as the practitioners of New Orleans
said “there are many ways to god”. This milieu is ecumenical, super-ecclesiastical, syncretistic and tolerant in outlook. In a way it becomes a skeleton or a framework for a large variety of practices, and also creates easy overlapping for practitioners of different traditions, with a common structure and common concepts. Synchronization is facilitated and re-enforced by overlapping communication structures, which prevail within the milieu (Campbell 1972, 122-123). Knowledge is spread mainly through the practitioners who uses communications media like pamphlets, lectures, books and internet forums. Ideas are mutually supportive across collectives, as the expressed ridicule and hostility of the greater society gives them a common consciousness of deviance. This has a unifying effect on the practitioners and also inspires them to adopt other’s ideas that have a good resonance with what they practice (Campbell 1972, 123). Campbell says that the milieu are inhabited by seekers, people who seeks a truth, self-exploration, spiritual experience, answers to problems in life among common reasons. Very individualistic values I will add. An individual who enters the cultic milieu will as a direct consequence of the “nature” of the milieu frequently travel rapidly through a wide variety of movements and beliefs, and in this process constitute yet another unifying force within the milieu. The seeker often has a problem-solving perspective, and perceives conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate, so they search for a system more satisfactory for their personal tastes and needs. The underlying view in the milieu is that truth and/or enlightenment is an esoteric commodity only to be attained after suitable preparation. They are on a quest for personal gain and understanding, which source does not have to also be spiritual, it can also very well be material (Campbell, 123-124). The seeker Campbell describes is almost identical to the mystic, the religious individualist, especially the practitioners of alternative traditions, which are a part of the milieu. And the cultic milieu is an important distributor of knowledge, as the networks of the seekers often cross boundaries of traditions and practices. The milieu is a pool of knowledge, and its open to quench the thirst for those who seek it.

**Cultic Reality**

So the practitioners live in a society where religion has made a retreat into private life, modernization and secularization has created a social arena where no religion holds true authority. Thus individualism has now formed the social imaginary of the society, creating a society where the individual is in the center and every individual has equal rights to define themselves and their reality. As science is reaching it explanatory limits, society, as Partridge
argues, is returning to a magical-culture. There is a religious-cultural shift happening, and there is a rise of cultic and mystic religious practitioners (Partridge 2004, 40). The practitioners do not stay with just one religion, but often try out several. Their attitude toward religious practice is very individualistic and pragmatic, often having the same motivations through several traditions. Hence I suspect that the practice does not express a certain tradition or religion, but is a product of the social imaginary of the general society, which is strongly influenced by individualism. Also the scientific worldview have created a need for empirical knowledge as basis for definitions of reality, this creates a need for experience in the search for finding truth and meaning, this supports the practice of experiential religions. Cultic and Mystic religion places the authority of definition on the individual itself, thus the individual now have the freedom to experience and create their own religious practices to a great degree, as swatos claimed “it is true if it is true for me”. The individual is now on a search for the truth, to experience the truth, it has become a searcher. Individuals now share and discuss their own understandings, ideas and experiences. Knowledge is distributed between individuals, not projected upon a community as more organized religions, and the individual chooses itself what knowledge to integrate into their practice. The many networks created by different individual overlaps, crosses and intertwines into a highly complex flow of knowledge, and thus makes the distribution of knowledge very varied and very spread. The cultic Milieu is one of the most important knowledge distributors of this kind, and is responsible for much of the syncretism and movement between traditions. It is in this context the similarities between Maglioccos pagans and the practitioners of Voodoo make sense, indeed it makes it obvious. In my view the principles as unifying factors does not just exist in the pagan community as described by Magliocco, but that it crosses the boundaries of traditions and unifies practitioners from different practices. These principles become skeletons for the practitioners of the spiritual traditions, religious symbols, ideas and practices become different expressions of the same principles. Magic is a good example for this, because the principle of magic as described by Magliocco is something the practitioners of New Orleans would resonate with. And a lot of the voodoo practitioners often do magical and ritual work with practitioners from other traditions, something that is possible through the shared understanding of certain principles. And as the nature of the Cultic Milieu is, many of the Voodoo practitioners have either practiced or have much experience with Paganism and Wicca from before starting with Voodoo. Thus a lot of the Voodoo practice has been interpreted on a foundation that is largely formed by previous practices as for example
paganism. Thus making it very possible that principles, ideas and concepts survives in the practitioners mind and gets a new expression or understanding in a new framework.

So the basic understanding of magic can be the same for the Pagan as for the Voodoo practitioner, but it differs in the symbols and mythic elements used. One can say that the new religious practices are build around attitudes and understandings constructed by individualism and the scientific worldview, thus unifying many different contemporary tradition and religions. It is in the expression and the symbolic and religious elements that are used that are different, but their essence is the same. Dr. Glover told me that Shamanism and magic was something people from all over the world shared naturally in prehistoric times, and that this unity was destroyed by organized religion. So the practitioner has an understanding of magic as a principle of human being, but still the new magic is not the same as the old one. This is different magic, it is not the same as the pre-enlightenment and older traditions of magic. It is modern in the sense that its using interpretation referencing to contemporary metaphors and psychology, but it is not disenchanted magic, it still is magic, just adapted to a modern context. The occultist world is enchanted, it is not based around secular or disenchanted terms, but it is how it is portrayed that is modern, the metaphors, explanations and interpretations are updated (Partridge 2004, 40-43).

Partridge continues to argue that there has been a change in the United States from “a spirituality of dwelling” to a “spiritual of seeking”, from “cradle to the grave” membership of particular traditions to piecing together their own religious faith like a “patchwork quilt”. They don’t need large communities to sustain the ‘truth’, the new religions is build around personal faith and only the person itself can verify its truthfulness. The people’s needs are different now, and thus these new religions serve the new needs (Partridge 2004, 44).
Chapter Three

Voodoo People

In the last chapter I explained the connection between individualism, modernity and the rise of mysticism in the United States. Now I want to zoom in on New Orleans, showing how “unorthodox” and mystic religion has strong historical and present ties to the city. The pragmatic religiosities started with slaves trying to keep their own culture in foreign hostile land, but today it is a part of the mystic religions. I will try to show this progression from a historical summary of religious activity in New Orleans and continue with describing the religious practices I met during my fieldwork. There are correlations, but the people, meaning and context are very different.

La Louisiane
During the Colonial period French Louisiana became the most northern point of a Circum-Caribbean region. Louisiana became in the region a colonial outpost for the mainland, first ruled by the French and then the Spanish. (Jacobs & Kaslow, 2001; 20)
The Financer John Law obtained in 1719 a charter for his *Compagnie des Indes* from the French government, and with him came the first five hundred slaves to the colony. (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 20) New Orleans became the military sentry for the lower Mississippi Valley and also a commercial center for the system of plantations in the region. The colonial Louisiana economy sustained a creole society that was French speaking and Roman Catholic by tradition and law. Officially French in culture, but because of the highly stratified and racially complex societies, Africanism permeated the culture. (Jacobs & Kaslow, 2001; 20) In 1860 there were 331,726 slaves in Louisiana. These slaves were taken from several regions of Africa, but were primary from Guinea, the Gold Coast and Angola. The main groups where identified as Mandinkas, Fon, Bambara, Fanti, Gambians and Senegalese, and later on Guineans, Yorubas, Igbo and Angolans. By 1812 the population was counting ten thousand residents. The majority constituted a diverse group where all was at least partially descendants of Africans, Europeans had by then become a minority. One of subgroups were the free people of color who usually were of mixed African and European ancestry, they were often highly educated, property owners and lived a life with style and leisure. They also formed creole communities, similar to the white creoles counterparts. A new group of creole people came from Haiti. Both free people and slaves had arrived as refugees from Haitian revolution, another wave came when napoleon invaded Spain and the French colonists were thrown out of Cuba. As they settled in Louisiana they integrated quickly and brought with them their own strain of creole culture. (Jacobs & Kaslow, 2001; 21)

**Gods, Masters and Slaves**
In New Orleans it was mostly Individuals and families that owned slaves and the use of the slaves varied greatly, from domestic servants to black smiths. On some construction projects hired slaves worked alongside free men. The slaves had a relatively flexible position and had a lot of contact with individuals from other parts of the social strata, thus they had more personal freedom than slaves at other places. And it was this flexible setting that created the opportunity for blacks to be involved in magico-religious activities. Some would even go on to establish themselves as independent ritual specialists. So “unorthodox” belief systems was practiced in New Orleans and gained new adherents in the city (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 21-22). This was despite the code noir, a law which prohibited non-Catholic religious activities among the slaves, and which stated that every slave should be baptized and trained in Catholicism. This law was perceived by the colonialists as being essential for the preservation
of the colony. The Code Noir had also the effect that it exposed slaves and other people of color to Catholicism. Visitors became impressed by the racially diverse participation in the Catholic rituals, but Catholicism’s impact on slaves and the free people of color varied. Some did find spiritual meaning and it became a vital belief system, some free women of color even established an order of nuns. But there were also those who had minimal contact with the church or even non-at all, and Catholic clergy cried about “moral and religious laxity” and church’s neglect of most blacks. Many slaves were baptized without any accompanying rituals or religious instruction. Part of the problem was that slave owners themselves did not support the code noir, and did not offer their full cooperation with the Catholic Church. The law also guaranteed slaves right to marriage, abstain from labor on Sundays and that the owners themselves had responsibility to oversee that the slaves got religious instructions and went to mass. Many slaves were reluctant to go to church as racism was present there, and bishops observed in terror that many of the slaves favored their own ritual practices, the drumming and dancing in New Orleans’ Congo Square (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 22-24). Also the majority of the Louisiana residents observed or participated in what is generally referred to as “folk” or “popular” Catholicism, regardless of their commitment to the church. The practices were deep embedded in the colonist folk culture and came from the countries in southern Europe. The Spanish and the French took them over the ocean and due to the lack of clergy and schools for conventional religious education, the practices were spread in their colonies (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 24).

Public Enemy
It was also during the colonial period the blacks started to use elements of African beliefs and ritual to create a cultural, social and religious life independent of the church. Court records, travel accounts and other sources from the eighteenth century indicate that slaves who came directly from Africa or from French islands in the Caribbean (from St. Dominique in particular) were involved in practices labeled as Voodoo or Gris-Gris. Gris-Gris was referring to the use of amulets, fetishes and magic, while Voodoo also had the elements of cult organization. Under the Worship of the Dahemoan snake god Damballah Wedo for example, there was feasts and rituals and they also found in the assemblies Christian saints and symbols intertwined with African spirits. The magico-religious practices became so common that court officials pointed to gris-gris every time there was a case of slaves plotting against their owners, without questioning its meaning. The general residents grew more fearful and as a
result the administration banned further importation of slaves from Martinique, as they were perceived as rebellious and more inclined to be attracted to voodoo. Slaves from St. Dominique could only enter Louisiana in the company of their masters. A Riot was actually growing in Louisiana in 1811, with the slaves marching against New Orleans, but it was crushed. It is unknown if Voodoo had any connection to it, but the reaction from the government indicates that they at least they suspected this (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 24-25).

The conditions for Afro-catholic religions such as voodoo in New Orleans early years were not easy, as police and government was putting great pressure on the practitioners. Blacks were frequently arrested for coming together to dance and drum, the Code Noir had restrictions on slave gatherings in Louisiana. The only location in New Orleans slaves had permission to gather was in the Congo Square, the slaves and ex-slaves assembled there regularly and conducted drumming and dancing associated with voodoo in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean. But this was not only places slaves was meeting, despite the police attempts to prevent it, they gathered and conducted activities outside the city’s center, in the bayou or in areas of thick cypress swamps (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 25-26).

**The Hole in History**

There exists little solid information on the voodoo practices of New Orleans, but the leaders associated with the practices are better known and documented. Sanite Dèdè, Dr.John and Marie Laveau have left great legacies. The latter one being worshipped as the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans and as my informants told me considered as New Orleans own Lwa for some practitioners, she had a tremendous influence throughout most of the nineteenth century. Truth has become mixed with fiction when their stories are told, often looked through the lens of racism and sensationalism, these stories depicted the voodoo practitioner as crazed practitioners who conducted orgies, human sacrifice and bestial offerings of animals. Occult and “black magic” practitioners where among the ones selling their service to a clientele, both white and black and thus was kept comfortably in business. But all of the practitioners that blended European and African belief-systems were perceived a threat to society, they became become public enemies (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 26-27).

**The Rise of the Black Church**

When Louisiana became a territory of the United States in 1803, many Protestants was sent to the territory to convert the residents from Catholicism to other branches of Christianity. A
new problem arose for the US authorities, as it was not just Voodoo they had to control but also protestant services the blacks wanted to hold on their own. Because of the danger of slave insurrection, the authorities feared the potential effects of large slave gathering, so they still found themselves under restrictions of their freedom to gather. In 1858 a city ordinance aimed at the African Methodist Episcopal Church made all black religious organizations illegal, and under the Civil war all churches where slaves and free people of color ventured without the mayors acceptance where closed. There was a rise in Baptist and Methodist conversion among the black population, and black Baptist claimed 500 churches, over 70,000 members and 650 ministries in Louisiana (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 27). The sectarian diversification in this period paved the way for less orthodox belief systems in New Orleans and they started to co-exist with the areas religious and magico-religious cults. For example some residents starting to study animal magnetism, and some free people of color left the catholic church to join a spiritualist circle (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 27-28). Following the Civil War the black population preferred practicing their religion in their own churches, turning away from those dominated by whites. The African American churches became centers for community life and arena for ethnic identity and expression, and they also created distinct forms of African American Christianity. It was in this context of diverse religious traditions, both popular and institutionalized that the spiritual churches came into being (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 28-30).

**Ghosts of Voodoo**

Jacobs and Kaslow explains that some members of the spiritual church movement believe the movement is the outgrowth of voodoo. A minister claimed that voodoo was the earliest spiritual practice in Louisiana, Mother Dora Tyson another minister believed that the spiritual churches was a continuation of the practices of Marie Levau, and thus carrying her legacy, as her practices where incorporated into Catholicism and Christianity. It is hard to define the claims as historical facts and they are not the only spiritual groups in New Orleans that claims this link, as many of the cities occult practitioners and hoodoo doctors also claims a link to Marie Levau (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 30-31).

As Hoodoo started to spread through the south of the United States, Voodoo and the afro-catholic cult declined. Hoodoo is a system of magic, divination and herbalism, and thus began to be used interchangeably with Voodoo in New Orleans, while the term Voodoo was extended to include conjure and root-work. This has lead the ideas and practices conducted by
figures as Marie Levau and the other to become repudiated, and also makes it hard to define what their practice actually was (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 30). Despite the death of the African gods in New Orleans, you can still hear and see their influence in the local culture. People shouting phrases deriving from African languages, snakes on holy places for various traditions, and especially in the former mentioned spiritual churches. But the quest for the historical authentic New Orleans Voodoo is made almost impossible, as the most famous of the described rituals were public performances made for general entertainment. And the accounts of secret or authentic Voodoo practice is almost none existent, without the papers sensationalist articles only three historical reports can be found on cases that may resembles Voodoo, but those descriptions also fits other religious traditions practiced by the black community at that time. Its hard to find any precise description of what they really were, has disintegrated by the twentieth century. But it left forms of magic, charms, divination and herbalism known as Gris Gris, that became a part of the rootwork and conjure that the black population practiced all over united states, the folk tradition that is Hoodoo (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 84-88).

**The Death of Voodoo?**
The reason for the demise of Voodoo could be the demographic patterns, by 1778 Louisiana had stopped importing slaves and after the purchase of Louisiana to the United States, the total amount of slaves peaked at 28,300, not much compared to the 702,000 slaves in Cuba. The ratio of blacks to whites was lower than the ratio found in other Caribbean islands and as there was fewer Africans arriving than it had been, it could be harder to maintain African traditions in Louisiana than in for example Haiti and Cuba. It is possible that this had a dramatic effect on the black populations knowledge of African traditions (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 87-88).

The voodoo cult in New Orleans was not based on one organization, but many smaller groups that was competing, the groups was based around leaders as for example Marie Levau. The practices and beliefs varied between the groups, as some used more Catholic influences and the rituals differed according to the leaders taste. Where Levaus ceremonies were so catholic that they resembled the mass, another Voodoo figure named Malvina Latour tried to keep Catholicism out of her practice to avoid being sacrilegious, but there were also interesting mixes as for example Doctor S. G. Alexander who was a spiritualist and a Voodoo priest.
With these practitioners Voodoo and Hoodoo in various forms were carried out well into the 20th century, and was observed by Zora Neal Hurston as she underwent various initiations and apprenticeships with New Orleans Voodoo practitioners, discovering that it was not a complex Voodoo religion but more similar to Conjure, magic that is focused around practical and earthly goals as breaking up love affairs, punishing enemies and etc (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 87-89). Jacobs and Kinslows describes the remnants of Voodoo practice in New Orleans as still being present. People who call themselves readers, healers, advisors, doctors and etc have carried on Hoodoo, conjure or gris-gris works in New Orleans, offering to reverse one’s luck or overcoming your enemies. They often mark their location of practice with an upright palm, a Jesus figure, a cross or an Indian head, they also puts the word spiritual or spiritualist in their adverts. The paraphernalia and tools for this kind of works are bought in candle shops or botanicas. Botanicas are mostly associated with the Hispanic Esperitistas and others drawn to the occult. Here you can buy tonics, oils and scents among other artifacts. whatever the religious beliefs that the Africans brought to Louisiana, there is today no organized Voodoo cult. But fragments of belief are still present and it is associated with the name Voodoo, which itself are now associated with other practices. New Orleans is now a tourist Mecca, and several Voodoo shops and a great deal of spiritual advisors and healers are now operating in New Orleans and catering tourists. Some would say the gods and the worship are now corrupted (Jacobs & Kaslow 2001, 91-92).

A New Wave
As New Orleans suffered from economic depressions and people fleeing the city in the first half of the twentieth century, the entertainment and tourist industries remained strong. They found out local traditions and food was attractive for tourists, thus making a New Orleans brand for marketing purposes. Crawfish, jazz, easy living, Les Bon Temps Rouler (let the good times roll) and Mardi Gras, it’s famous carnival, became synonyms with New Orleans as marketing symbols, but also ghost stories, traditions and rituals were dragged up from history to give New Orleans and exotic and exciting atmosphere. New Orleans Voodoo was now gaining focus of a promotional campaign, and a new movement was now giving it it’s attention. (Filan 2011, 38)

Charles Massicot Gandolfini established the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum in 1972, being an artist he was not afraid to use dramatic effects to showcase the stories. This has given him and his museum a reputation as a sensationalist tourist trap. But Filan claims that
he is part of a “revitalizing” project that started in the 70’s, by deciding to share his fascination of Voodoo with the public. He himself claimed to have inherited his knowledge from Haiti, he was a rootworker, clairvoyant and conjurer and did services for clients. His museum had an exhibition of objects associated with voodoo and he even had an albino python that was used for rituals. A lot of local practitioners of various traditions were also conducting ceremonies in or outside the museum. Vodou Mambos, Santeria priestesses and occultists have performed in his museum, and Filan claims that he was among the first to begin the “mixing and matching” of various African Diaspora Traditions, a trend that is strongly present today in New Orleans. Gandolfos vision of Voodoo was becoming popularized and became somewhat of a standard through his work, and it also inspired others to start in the voodoo business. But Filan also says that what started as his own ideas began to assume a life of its own. As the example of one of the main attractions in the museum, a Voodoo altar built by him and his brother, visitors started to bring candles, statues, notes and offerings to the altar and it thus started to grow. As Filan quotes Elizabeth Thomas Crocker’s Master’s thesis:

“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.” (Crocker in Filan 2011, 45).

So even though the museum is not taken seriously by all and may be considered more of a tourist curiosity than a place for spiritual awakening, his vision of Voodoo became a seed for others to grow on and also brought Voodoo back to the public. He and other practitioners helped to develop a new Voodoo in New Orleans, and this movement drew upon old practices and added material from other and new traditions. Some scorned and still scorns this as tourist traps and a practice for “bored white folks”, but other recognized the power of the spirits who were residing in New Orleans (Filan, 2011; 45-46).

The City of the Occult
Today the occult has a great presence in New Orleans, there are not just the shops everywhere in the French Quarter of New Orleans, a lot of practitioners of different traditions call this city their home. There are several cemeteries within the city limits, set above ground as small cities of the dead. These are popular tourist spots, but also have great emotional value for the inhabitants. They went there to talk to their friends, family or other spirits. The inhabitants of
New Orleans know they have reputation associated with death. Walking down the streets one of the most common signs hanging around was telling that the vacant apartment was not haunted, advertisements for cemetery tours were on every corner and tourists followed maps around to experience the most haunted houses in Americas most haunted city. The people in New Orleans have a reputation of being more superstitious than the average American, and believes so themselves. They speak of the supernatural in a familiar way, it’s a part of their regional identity, their history and their myths. As Brandy said “Voodoo is so integrated in our culture, it’s in the air.” Going down the streets of the French Quarter, you see street artists painting skeletons, ghosts, and Voodoo Dolls. On Jackson Square jazz brass bands are entertaining the crowd while several Diviners are foreseeing their future. In the side streets you will find small shops displaying morbid art and decorations in their windows. Going inside will reveal a vast span of books about occultism and alternative spiritual traditions. They are also selling the equipment to go with them. On the shops billboards words like Voodoo, vampires, wiccan and witchcraft where written alongside herbs, spells and supplies. The occult scene of New Orleans consists of a vast array of traditions, religions and ontologies, and there is constant flow between them. Objects and artifacts from the different traditions are sold in the same shop, sometimes even put on the same shelf. If you enter a shop with ambitions of becoming more prosperous, you will get magical alternatives from all the different traditions and then be recommended to pick the one you are most comfortable with. Indeed, a lot of the practitioner I spoke to said that they moved to New Orleans just to take part in the occult scene, describing the city as an end of a pilgrimage, a place they finally could be their self. Voodoo is the tradition most associated with New Orleans, and thus you will find a great deal of practitioners practice voodoo in one way or another. Some are identifying as a New Orleans Voodoo practitioner, they describe their practice as fluid, improvisational, creative and ecstatic. They claim that this is a very old and influential part of New Orleans spiritual history, but as described earlier, the accuracy of these stories are contested.

**The Voodoo Scene**
Voodoo comes in many forms and combinations in New Orleans, and even if its difficult to categorize each practitioner, the understanding among themselves where that one could divide the practitioners between two traditions, The New Orleans Voodoo and Haitian Vodou.
The New Orleans Voodoo practitioners typically work with the Haitian spirits called the Lwa, the African spirits called Orishas and the Catholic saints. There are also practitioners who practice Haitian Vodou, this tradition is inspired by the practice in Haiti, and often the head clergy of those houses Haitian. There was no Haitian houses centralized in New Orleans, but some of the practitioners were part of houses located in New York and other cities with a larger Haitian diaspora. Haitian Vodou is described as more rigid than New Orleans Voodoo, more structured and more rules, but not dogmatic. They themselves believe this is the case as they have a stronger contact with the tradition’s source, they perceive this as a strength compared to the rootless New Orleans Voodoo. Apart from these two branches of Voodoo that are most prominent in New Orleans, there are many people blending voodoo into their own personal practice. For example there was a ceremonial magician, which beside his main form of practice also devoted time to the voodoo spirits. I also talked to a Voodoo Priestess who were a part of a temple that where not dedicated to a single religion, but practiced Voodoo, Witchcraft, Native American spirituality and etc. And there was one witch who identified with Wicca, but used Voodoo deities in her work. Voodoo was not just for the voodooists, it poured into the other traditions also, and elements from other traditions also influenced voodoo. Practitioners engaged and communicated across the traditions, acquiring knowledge and learning from each other. The occultic scene is a good example of the mechanics of the cultic milieu, as the processes described by Campbell is almost a blueprint of the social networks and its functions in New Orleans (Campbell 1972, 122-124).

**The Milieu**

Since occult and alternative traditions is thriving in New Orleans, with a lot of different shops, ceremonies and practitioners, its easy to meet new people, and make new experiences and thoughts, making occult knowledge and information accessible. This thus makes it easy for the practitioner to choose for itself what practices they will incorporate in their work. None of the practitioners I knew where strictly with Voodoo or had done just Voodoo, most of them where working with or had experiences with other traditions, making their own spiritual way based on their own life and choices. Some had been practicing paganism, ceremonial magic or spirituality more generally. Indeed, most of the practitioner I knew had backgrounds in western occult and alternative practices, and not a background in Afro-Caribbean traditions. Thus I believe that the practitioners I encountered are more related to western religious and spiritual movements that were discussed in previous chapter, just that
the explicit symbolic universe is based around voodoo. Usually they started with Paganism or Wicca, as most of those I met where from places where Voodoo was not much present. Most of the practitioners came from a Catholic or Protestant household. It was later in their life they started with Voodoo, often coinciding with the time they arrived in New Orleans. The reason why they came is as many as the number of people I talked to, but most of the practitioners claimed they were on a personal journey, or that they were seekers of their own truth, as some put it This was displayed through a very pragmatic and individual take on their own religious lives. They saw spirituality as something that comes from within, making the person into the authority. The use of and identifying with the word spiritual instead of religious, is to associate themselves with a more individual and personal way of practicing religion, as many of my informants say “there is a Vodou saying, the Christian goes to the church to pray to god, the Vodouists goes to the temple and become God”. They would not say they were part of a congregation, but rather of a spiritual community. Their social integration are based around knowledge distribution and personal growth, not to form and uphold a religious congregation.

The shop
The shops are one of the pools knowledge flows through, and a very important one. It is a meeting spot for different traditions, practitioners and also a place for outsiders to learn more about the different traditions. Some of my informants’ introduction to Voodoo began in a shop. The shops are in itself a very mundane space, it’s function is providing goods and services based on their clients needs. But it is also a spiritual place, often containing altars, having a room for clairvoyance work, shrines for people to place their candles, as well as being a distributor of spiritual knowledge. This was most evident among the Voodoo shop located in the French quarter, because they knew they catered tourist but also portrayed themselves as a spiritual shop, a representation of “authentic Voodoo”. Balancing the fine line between a commercial tourist shop and a representative of a legitimate tradition.

Entering the incense filled shop with burgundy walls and big dark logs sticking out under the ceiling, one meets filled shelves of what may be considered exotic products. Next to the register was a lot of envelopes containing spells for various occasions, from selling ones house to getting the mate of ones choice. Other shelves where full of alligator heads, Florida water and small lucky charm figures of pets. Florida water is for spiritual use but the pet figurines are mostly cute souvenirs. To the left was a door leading to another room, where
they stored occult books and conducted divinations for customers. There where also shelves packed tall candles called seven-day candles and shorter ones. They were made for special purposes, all had the same graphics on the jar label, but with different colors and the candles had different colors as well. As with the spell envelopes, the candles were made for a varied range of purposes. The purposes were very practical. One or two was for increasing your inner energy or spirituality, but most of them were made for very concrete goals, spiritual remedies for mundane problems. They also sold oils made of herbs with the same purposes as the candles, it was different tools to get to the same outcome. Under the board was a collection of potent roots and rocks, potent as in “magical” abilities. More complex products were the ritual kits containing ingredients and instructions to perform your own rituals. Again the function of the product is very practical, for example one of the kits is for helping you in court. It is clear that the products are based around mundane practical problems, its not for salvation or the community, but for the individual and its personal life.

The biggest room was in the back where Haitian ritual flags called Drapo and African masks hung on display and altars were placed up against the walls. The altars were for the Orishas and their Lwa and Saint equivalent. They explained to me that Orishas are ancient African spirits, the Lwa are Haitian and mainly constructed under the colonial rule in Haiti while the saints are from Catholicism. The entities from the different traditions are linked to one another based on characteristics and purposes, but New Orleans Voodoo is traditionally most associated with the Orishas, Zaar explained, and thus they are the focus in the shop.

A lot of cigarettes and money was placed on the altars as offerings from customers, and apart from the thematic décor done by the shop itself, there were some more unique gifts clearly given from other parts of the world but still fitted in with the theme and characteristics of the spirit. For example on the altar for Agwe, the spirit mostly associated with the sea, there were some figurines that looked like the stereotypical northern Norwegian in their yellow raincoats, figurines I have seen in many shops back home in Norway. I don’t claim they’re Norwegian, but they are clearly based neither in Africa, nor Haiti. On the altar of Oggoun, the spirit of war and metal, there was placed a big iron pot containing a machete. The Ghuedeh Altar was decorated with skulls and liquor bottles, as the spirits of the dead are well known to love a good party. Every spirit who was present with an altar had their own dolls for sale, and it was also dolls made for various other purposes. The look of the dolls revealed that they were made for more decorative purposes than the rest of the products. They came with small notes containing information about their history or symbolism, some of them written in a humorous way. Local artists, who were Voodoo practitioners themselves, made them, and this was an
important fact to bring to the customers. Even though they were sold as decorative objects, they essentially for spiritual use, as a conductor of energy or focus tool under magical work. The picture of a Voodoo doctor pinning a doll to inflict pain on his enemies is one of the most stereotypical pictures of Voodoo for the rest of the society, as the media likes to show this shocking scenario or use other aspects of the religion to shock the audience. The voodoo dolls in the shop are not marketed as tools for vile magic, if not representing a spirit, they are for focusing on personal gains, increasing sexuality, money or luck. Made in a simple fashion, the materials used are cloth, sticks, buttons and other cheap materials. The dolls are the representation of local traditions coming out of the poorer parts of the city, the materials used to make the dolls are depending on which materials they have access to, so the dolls will vary from one location to another. New Orleans is a port town so materials as cloth were easier to come by, therefore the extensive cloth use in New Orleans Dolls. In the rural Louisiana they used more moss and materials found in nature. Of course in modern society one can come across a much larger range of different materials, but the dolls are still made by hand and with the traditional materials to be authentic. Claiming authenticity is very important when making a living from voodoo.

Voodoo business
The shop also acted the role as distributor of knowledge, and it was a role they took seriously. The shop is decorated to create an experience for the visitors as much as sell products. The practitioners working there give information and guided tours, even to people who are not likely to buy anything. Almost all the altars had signs explaining whom they were for and what they represented, and the workstation was placed in the shop so people could watch them make oils and soap and come with questions. They are very serious about educating the people, especially because of the stigma related to Voodoo created by the media and greater society. Also the location of the shop in the most tourist heavy part in the city have made its influence on how they conduct their business, and since most of the potential customers are tourists they are the target group. The role they played was closer to an informer, not an entertainer, as they where clear that their role was to educate about Voodoo. Even though most of the customers just wanted a glance of the infamous New Orleans Voodoo, someone with a genuine interest would enter occasionally. It could be practitioners of other alternative traditions wanting to learn more about voodoo, or maybe they are just interested in religions and spirituality more generally. All the employees were practitioners
themselves, so they would gladly discuss and talk about their tradition and also learn more about others. One time an Indian woman who was based in Hinduism but who also practiced New Age to some extent, visited the store. The practitioner at work was happy to inform her that he used Hindu gods on his altars, and started talking about which Voodoo spirits correlated with what Hindu god. They discussed each other’s practices, forming each other’s perception and in their mind expanding their knowledge. And the practitioners working there said that they could get new influences by talking to other practitioners and spiritual people coming by, and also expand their network around the city as that it is very likely that people interested in the subject will enter the shop at some times. Also the owner said that to some extent the shops are helping each other out, so there are also networks stretching across the businesses. But outside, they had no defining authority, as it was just another expression of Voodoo in the city. Another interesting incident happened when a black couple visited the store. The man became very interested in a Tarot Card deck based on the Orishas. When they arrived at the register, they told the practitioner that he had not heard about the Orishas or African religious traditions before. The practitioner started to briefly educate them and showed them some products that could be of interest to them. Whether the information they got about African traditions will strengthen an African identity for the couple, or whether they keep it as some fun and interesting trivia, they got the information from that shop. So the shop holds authority on the subjects associated with it, and it looks like the practitioner working there knows it and acts accordingly. And being in the middle of a popular tourist city, this is a role they can’t escape.

The six people working there were all Voodoo practitioners, but they did not belong to the same voodoo houses. One was initiated in a Haitian Vodou house centered in New York, where the head priestess is Haitian. The owner was also initiated into a Haitian house in New York but she identified herself as a New Orleans Voodoo practitioner. The other people working there were New Orleans Voodoo practitioners, although one was not initiated yet, she was discovering the religion on her own but hoping to some day get initiated.

For the employees it was a shop and their workplace, it was not a temple and they were not in the same religious groups, they were colleagues, and had their own spiritual affiliations outside the shop. Off course they talked about Voodoo and spirituality, but they did not work together in a religious way. But still, they learned and shared knowledge with each other and also rootwork where done together or learned to the ones that started to work there, because a lot of the oils, soaps and the likes was made at the shop. Thus they are a part of each other’s
The botanica
The other shop I visited a lot was Sallie Ann’s Botanica, being out of the tourist area. The botanica perceived themselves as a neighborhood shop, being out of the tourist area, many locals come to the shop to buy supplies for personal use and get divinatory readings. They had essentially the same products as the French quarter shop, but in bigger quanta’s and also the placement of the products was more practical like a regular store, where in the French quarter shop the products where much more placed to be in display. While customers in the French Quarter shop tended to ask about the products themselves, customers in the botanica had personal problems they wanted to solve, or they come with their own shopping list. Some of the customers even had so much knowledge and experience that discussions with the cashier erupted sometimes. And if the botanica did not have what the customer wanted, they tried to find a suiting replacement among the vastness of different roots, candles and deities the botanica distributed. Contrary to the shop in the French quarter, the botanica sold ingredients too. You could get custom-made Gris Gris bags at the shop, but they did not sell ingredients separately. In the botanica they had a big shelf with a lots of roots and herbs, and they also had a selection of oils. The customer could pick the ingredients they wanted and assemble the ritual or magical objects themselves, or the employees of the botanica would help. If they couldn’t come to the shop by themselves, either because of discretion or they don’t have the opportunity to go there, one could call the shop and the ones working at that time can do the ritual. For example if you are out of luck or in a financially tight spot, you can call the Botanica and tell them your problems, and which spiritual or religious tradition you are practicing. If your Catholic, they will use candles dedicated to saints, and say some catholic psalms when they light them. If you are into Vodou, they will use the Lwa. Off course all this could also be mixed if that is what your preference is. And the more deities you can turn to, the better. It is a matter of similarity between the ingredients, you use the once spiritual network, and they are influencing each other. Brandi Kelley is the owner of the shop and even though she is initiated into a Haitian Vodou house in New York, she considers herself a practitioner of New Orleans Voodoo. She also wants her shop to be a representation of New Orleans Voodoo to keep the tradition alive. Even though the presence of Voodoo in New Orleans history is debated, she claims that Voodoo has always been practiced in New Orleans, and therefore it is important that individuals like her honor it and keeps the practice alive.
associated with similar themes, forces and scenarios. And different practitioners have often their own receipts, this is characteristic of all experienced practitioners.

Near a bearing pole on the floor was a big cluster of candles, lit up by customers. Outside the shop was also a stand holding many candles. They also had a sculpture of the popular Mexican deity Santa Muerte and another one for New Orleans Voodoo Queen Marie Levau outside of the shop, both surrounded by candles in the hope of help from the respected deities. Sallie Ann and local artists even built a shrine around the Marie Levau sculpture because of the recent closing down of the most popular cemeteries due to vandalizing of the graves, this means that public access to the tomb of Marie Levau is restricted, so they created the shrine as a new place to worship her. There were a lot of candles lit at all times, so many people are seeking comfort there.

The Hounfo
Sallie Ann has built her own Hounfo in the Bywater neighborhood, and is the place where the weekly ceremonies are conducted. Greeted by a metal sculpture of a man in a top hat, you enter a trail going between two houses. Finally arriving at a wall with Vodou inspired artwork painted on it, clearly inspired by the Gueddeh, the spirits of the dead. Opposite from this painting, on the other side of the little alley is the entrance to the temple, or a Hounfo, which is the Haitian term. Claimed by the Vodou house to be the only functioning Peristyle in New Orleans, they have ceremonies there every Saturday and other holy occasions like Easter, but also have regular choir practices there. Having the Peristyle gives them the chance to conduct ceremonies on a regular basis and also a social platform to learn songs and share knowledge. This is something most of the other practitioners I talked to lacked, and something they also missed. Instead they had to conduct their ceremonies in their apartments, which required complete refurnishing and a lot of planning. The Peristyle was a light green building with Tibetan prayer flags hanging over the entrance doors. Sallie Ann told me she had bought the property when it was a nothing but a spot of barren swamp. The neighborhood was a low income area, and crime was high at that time. She had to go through a lot of trouble to get permission to build it, but with the help of the Lwa and personal dedication, a string of fortunate events resulted in the erection of the building. She told me they built it in the same manner as in Haiti, placing magic objects in the house structure, doing the rituals needed

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5 Vodou Sanctuary and religious center (Métraux 1989, 60)
6 House of ceremonies (Métraux 1989, 77)
when for example putting down the corner stones. Entering the Hounfo, the first thing you see is the *Poteau-Mitan*7. Going from floor to roof. It has a painting of a snake, which slithers upwards. I am told the center pole symbolizes the contact between our realm and the spiritual realm. Against the wall to the left of me, stood one red and one white altar. The white Altar is for the Rada Lwa, and the red is for Petwo Lwa. Rada is characterized as calm and cool spirits, the Petwo is the fiery and fast ones. I was told that the many of the Rada spirits came from Africa, but the Petwo was born in Haiti, under the colonial rule, thus explaining their fiery and aggressive nature. The legend has it that the Petwo Lwa Erzulie Dantor ignited the Haitian Revolution, Houngan John told me. The Rada and the Petwo altar was separated with a sheet hanging from the ceiling, its Haitian tradition to keep them separated. To the right from the Petwo altar was the Gueddeh altar, decorated with skeleton inspired figurines, candles and art.

Left to the Rada altar they had put up an altar for Maya Deren, writer of the influential ethnography on Haitian Vodou, named “Divine Horsemen”(2004). The setup of the altars was in the same manner as in Haiti, but the Maya Deren altar is her touch. And even though the construction and setup of the house was inspired greatly by the Hounfo’s of Haiti, she had given her own touch to it. The paintings hanging there were her artwork, and there was lamps formed as a jellyfish and other decorative objects that personalized it, it was her hounfo. Like her practice, it is her interpretations. The elements are Haitian, but she uses it in a new context, gives it new meaning, tweaks it to express herself. Its not a representation of Haitian Vodou, it is a representation of her vision, something she is very aware of as she explains the house’s practice as “their style of Vodou”.

**Voodoo Expression**

As we saw in the start of the chapter, the Voodoo practitioner has always had their own touch to their practice. Even though I claim that the practitioners I encountered have a background in western religiosity, local cultural history and the legends still influence the practitioners today. Indeed, it is the pragmatic and individualistic aspect that attracts the practitioners to Voodoo. They see it as allowing them to express their spirituality more freely. They see this characteristics as being a part of Voodoo’s “nature”, it is reasonable to suggest that the concept of Voodoo’s nature is built up by the stories and legends about it, as they often use these old stories to legitimate their “loose” practice, “Marie Levau also did her own thing”.

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7 Center-post, the pivot of ritual dance (Métraux 1989, 77)
The shops and the hounfo are based around some traditionally or generally agreed upon concepts about Voodoo, but the expression is theirs, it is their vision that it represents and this is something they are aware of and is intended. This is also something that everyone in the milieu is aware of and there is no definite way of practicing Voodoo, just different versions which one chooses to agree with. I will discuss this more closely in the next chapter, but for now I will add that this creates a social arena for the practitioner to define their own reality, as there is no definitive answer. This can also be seen in the shop, as the products for sale are not necessarily limited to one tradition, the shops have a more general assortment. Products from different traditions are available, often with the same functions because the customers rarely are dedicated to just one tradition. The pragmatic aspect is also visible in how products are presented, they are tools for personal problems and thus very practical. There is no greater morale or cosmological meaning to it, the practitioner has a self-defined problem, the spiritual shop has the remedy. But seeing through all the differences the practitioners still share something, and that is an understanding of a universe deeper and more magical than it first appeared.
Chapter Four

The Searchers

Like a bee, moving from one flower, spreading the flowers pollen on its travel, the practitioner moves through different traditions and practices, always taking something with him, which he can possibly spread elsewhere. The practitioners are the seekers whom Campbell described, those who constituted the cultic milieu, through networks and bottlenecks like the shops knowledge is distributed. But it is the practitioners who are the distributors, who move the knowledge around. Their knowledge is a blend of personal reflection around external ideas and own experiences. All of this is gathered through their quest for personal truth, the chase after clarity and spiritual experiences.

Freedom of Experience

Like the cowboy, the practitioners don’t perceive themselves as being fully integrated to society, they perceive themselves as standing outside the conventional culture. Instead they are creating their own world. And like the cowboy help those who seek their expertise by
making their skills useful to the society, although they try to heal their community in a spiritual way rather than gunning down its enemies. The individualistic practitioners seek to follow their own journey. It is only by making sense of their own life they can evolve spiritually, it is only by focusing on yourself to become a good person you can make the world a better place.

Sabina Magliocco describes experience as the unifying factor for Pagans and Witches, as they have no common beliefs or faiths, but they share the experience of magical practice (Magliocco 2004, 97). Experience is also important in the Voodoo community, as the contexts are similar. The glorification of the individual and the pragmatic spirituality makes experience a sign for someone who has made decisions, deliberately sought situations to expand his consciousness. From these experiences they have gained knowledge and self-reflection for first-hand experiences and empirical knowledge remain as the most valuable. The practitioners will stress the importance of experiencing rituals and ceremonies, as well as experiencing the world they live in. A Hounsi named tom said that he loved ceremonies because he liked to experiment with consciousness, just to be caught in the energy and try to dive deeper into it. For him theologian aspects did not seem that important, the experience itself and his quest to enhance it, held more truth. He underlined how the songs, drums and the dances are there to create an ecstatic atmosphere, to ready the ground for a spiritual experience.

The ceremonies I attended seemed to be mainly arranged to give such experiences, no teaching or lessons, it is too create an ecstatic experience for the participants. Ceremonies are very performative, in Sallie’s house the words are spoken in French or creole, Zaar told me that in his New Orleans Voodoo house they used English and old African words they no longer understand, so it seems that it is the experience which is important, to move the feelings of the participant, not necessarily to make them understand it. Thus being more for setting an atmosphere for the imagination to unfold, than to constitute a social order.

Understanding, truth and meaning are all something that should come from the individual self, the interpretation is for the individual alone to discover, it’s their own meaning and their own truth that shall guide them.

The spiritual experience is not just limited to the rituals and ceremonies, many of the practitioners felt the presence of the spirits around them in daily life and did also actively try to communicate with them on a daily basis. They described a sense of being in a deeper contact with nature and the world, feeling the energies supporting them and watching over them. These daily experiences are perceived just as important as the ritual experiences. When
they feel an unexpected change in the energetic flow in their daily life, they may experience a crisis. They may feel a loss of support or connection from the spirits, maybe life gets tougher or the practitioner is feeling they are becoming unluckier in general. These scenarios make them anxious giving them a feeling of disconnection and loneliness, maybe also a realization that they are on the wrong path. They have to experience something new to see if they can find a new remedy there, something has to change and actions has to be made. The feeling of crisis is not raised by an external event, as for example Durkheim (1947, 40) described when the sacred and profane meet, the crisis comes from internal, they feel that something is wrong. Then they will search for the source of the problem, and external events may come in to question. When struck by a crisis, the practitioner will use the tools from the traditions known to them, but if these do not work satisfactory, her or she will turn to other traditions trying to find remedies there. Sometimes the practitioner will perceive the situation as a call from deities or from other religions and thus feel a need engage with this tradition. This does not mean they will abandon the old one, but they will add the new elements in their personal practice. Although a change in practice doesn’t have to be caused by a crisis, for it is actually very normal to incorporate new elements into an existing practice. As mentioned before they are on a journey of self-development and self-discovering, and are thus always on the look out for new ways to expand their practice and individualize it. The journey metaphor is important to understand this religious practice, as they are always on the look out for new elements, ideas or concepts to experience and try to make them more experienced, to gain more knowledge. There is many ways to Rome, and there is an understanding among the practitioners that there also are many ways to divinity. This means that they have the understanding that the way they are practicing right now is not necessary the only way, but it is their personal version. Indeed, no one could guarantee that they would stay with voodoo for the rest of their life, even though they had a sense of belonging there now, they loved it and wanted it to stay in their life, but there was also a sense that they did not want to close the doors completely. They dread conformity, fear the prospect of not evolving personally and to stagnate is almost considered as a spiritual death. But in the syncretic nature of occult practice generally, and in the New Orleans practitioners, its doubtful that they will abandon Voodoo completely, but the practice can still change radically if the practitioners implement many new elements, or their structure it around another pantheon or tradition. For a cowboy, the journey can never end.
Like I have stressed before, the practitioners are not anchored in one ontology, one worldview. Instead they often combine them, change them or manipulating them to fit their own understanding. This process of syncretism is always present, always changing, discovering and moving. The occult religiosity can be looked at as rapacious, where experience and meaning is found through extensive research, study and enactment of different traditions. Always filtering through the practitioner themselves, who have to, keep evolving, exploring and experiencing or else they are in the risk of feeling stagnant or caged. The concern is self-development, finding the truths about themselves and the world they live in, finding and evolving their inner spirit and connection to the world and its deities, a concern they feel are not shared by the rest of the society, those not spiritual, satisfied with their “shallow” life is considered “brickheads” as one Hounsi put it. They see the search for meaning and self development as a fundamental trait of being human, thus not to explore themselves and come in contact with nature and the divine is considered unnatural and negative, not to mention denying themselves to be the divine beings they could be.

**Beginning the Journey**

None of the practitioners I talked to were born into voodoo, neither was there any expectations of them to start with voodoo. Voodoo was rarely the first thing they tried out as they usually had some religious experience from before. The stories about how the different practitioners ended up in Voodoo are so many as there are practitioners, but many of them described the discovery of Voodoo as unexpected, a really pleasant one. A Houngan Asagwe named John was raised Christian, but because of his rebellious clothing and critical questions about the liturgy the preacher called him spawn of Satan, deeply insulted he left church. After this incident he grew skeptical of the church and organized religion. He had always liked to do “weird things” as he puts it, he started with paganism and witchcraft. But realizing Wicca was heterocentric and that the magic was based around the unification between man and woman, he as a homosexual male felt alienated. He found Vodou through a tip from a pagan friend. Since John was originally from the Caribbean, this was for him a way back to his roots. He could not have joined another house than the house he fell for, as it was not as rigid and orthodox as many of the Haitian houses. He likes the freedom that comes with it, and he think it should be fun, exciting and fluid.
A Manbo Asagwe named Kathy was raised in a Baptist church, looking back, she now see it filled with negative energy because of their strict sermons and how the preacher scared the congregation with hell. Her parents also felt the negativity of the church and the family shifted to a non-denominational church, which was protestant. They were happier there and celebrated God’s love. After college she married a Lutheran who was studying to become a priest. She fancied Lutherans as they were more liberal and appeared to like everyone. On the other hand she hates preachers who preach rigid rules to how to live your life in order to receive God’s love, since she believes God’s love is more inclusive than that. She believes that everyone has the ability of reason, and thus should use it to live the good life and represent Jesus, don’t go around doing dumb shit. After the divorce she moved to New Orleans and bought a house there. She soon after found out a local Vodou priestess was conducting public ceremonies to protect local houses during the hurricane season, so as a house owner herself and interested in the spiritual she went. She found it very fascinating and it really triggered her interest. She later joined the same priestess’ other public ceremonies, and she fell in love with the practice. And after many years, she finally got initiated herself. It was the emotions and experience she fell in love with and she found religious love again. She found the love of God again, as she put it. The performative aspect, the lack of rigid liturgy took the focus from rigid rules and correct beliefs and conduct, opening more space for the experience itself and the emotions communicated and shared.

Zaar is a New Orleans Voodoo priest and also the head priest of his own house. He is also claim to have a medical condition that he called Vampirism, meaning he needs to drink blood to stay healthy and vital. Zaar broke with his family Protestantism and started practicing shamanism early in his life, before continuing with paganism, druidism and so on. But nothing could keep his interest for long, and after helping a friend move down to new Orleans he fell in love with the city and moved there himself. He then started having a lot of dream sequences, they especially featured Baron Samedi, whom he did not know who he was at this time. He did his research and started to practice on his own with an altar to Baron Samedi, after a while he met his god mother \(^8\) and got initiated into a New Orleans Voodoo house. He has always been able to see the dead, and he thinks that’s why Baron Samedeli chose him. Zaar thinks this ability may have been a trait inherited from his Cherokee ancestors, as his father’s family is Cherokee. He considers himself as a seeker of truth, never done with his quest for

\(^8\) A god parent is a clergy that initiated the practitioner and thus is seen as the spiritual parent of him. They have responsibility over the practitioner, and is there to guide them on their spiritual journey.
knowledge. Presently he is now initiated also into a Haitian Vodou house centered in New York, to learn more about the Haitian tradition, learning and growing there while simultaneously practicing New Orleans voodoo. When talking about learning and acquiring knowledge, it seems he perceives this as a fundamental part of his life, a process he don’t think will end and neither one he want to end. Always evolving, always discovering and always closer to the revelations of the universe.

But even though many of the practitioners I talked to broke with or moved away from organized Christianity, many of them still went to church for religious service and confession. And since Voodoo is also based around one great god, they still practice monotheism, just with another perspective. In Voodoo, god is too big to concern himself with human affairs, which is why they have spirits to communicate too. So they did not necessarily break completely with Christianity, but they wanted a religious or spiritual context that resonated with them as persons. Kathy wanted to find God’s love again, John sought a religion where he fitted in and Zaar wanted to find his way. Since it is a focus on that the practice have to fit them as a person, and not that they have to fit their person to the practice. The practitioner will search for the traditions and elements that integrate easier into their life, to their practice. Thus they will try out different practices, integrating the elements that fits them before moving onwards if they don’t feel there is more to gain there, or if their life is moving to another location where a new tradition may trigger their interest. They are always open for a new experience, and thus will take the chance when it arrives.

Tom was a Hounsi from an Irish-Catholic background, who have been practicing paganism and shamanism in Washington before moving to New Orleans, where he became the neighbor of a hounfo and naturally got interested in Voodoo. Tom sees himself on a personal journey, the priority being the evolving of his own spirituality. He used to be a part of the Radical Faeries, a counter-cultural movement redefining queer consciousness through spirituality, and is still in contact with many of its members. His homosexual orientation is important for how he understand spirituality, and believes that gays have a better potential for psychic and divination work than heterosexuals. A lot of the “spiritual foundation” he have is from his own research, studying and reading a lot about spirituality and pseudoscience. He himself decides what to add to his practice, though when in the Hounfo he does Vodou. The practical aspect of weekly ceremonies is very important to him, as it gives him an arena where he can experience with consciousness on a regular basis. It is through these experiences he gets to know and experience the energies, and also evolve his own control over these experiences.
Others needed a way in their life, feeling lost in the dark, spiritual and individual progression was perceived as a ladder from the depths of one’s mind to a state of clarity and understanding. Henri is a Hounsi, who very recently got her first initiation. She says she was in a period in her life where she was not spiritually or emotionally uplifted, she describes it as a dark time. She felt a great pressure in her daily life and things happening in her life got to hectic to deal with, she felt that something was missing in her life but she did not know what. As she described herself, it was more like Vodou found her than her finding Vodou. She started to sense the energies in her life and started engaging them. After starting practicing she felt completed, giving meaning to her life in contrast to her life before which she now perceived meaningless. After starting to attend ceremonies, she is feeling the longing for something lost have started to fade away and is now feeling stronger and more empowered. She has now been practicing for five years and been with the house between six months to one year, but she feels that spirit has always been with her before on good and bad days. But the difference is that she is now sure of the spirits support, and that pain and misery is not forming her daily life anymore. The spirits are guiding and supporting her through her life and also helping her fulfill her destiny, it gives her hope and belief in that the spirits and ancestors are with her all the time and are with her when thing seems hopeless. She believes Vodou is there to help her live the life she is here on earth to live, her whole life has been leading up to this. She also believes she is on a journey, a journey she can’t foresee and she thus can’t guarantee that she is staying with the house for the rest of her life, but right now it is invaluable for her, as it give her experience and knowledge needing for the rest of the journey, and she does not know what the spirit has planned for her.

Other practitioners had an interest in the subject, but not actively seeking it out to practice it. But when upon meeting the practices their fascination turned to devotion, finding elements that resonated deeply with them as persons. A Manbo Asagwe named Maria was also just interested in the alternative religions when she started to seek out Voodoo shops. At that time new she moved to New Orleanse, she was an atheist. She had prior to this time been experiencing ghosts, strange noises and humanoid shadows, but always considered it as her head playing tricks on her. She first tried New Orleans Voodoo, but due to lack of self-discipline, the practice did not fit her and she lost interest. She started to become interest in Mayan and other Native religious beliefs, but it was no more than an interest. After a while she got lost in the French quarter and suddenly found
herself in front of a Voodoo Shop she hadn’t seen before, with her interest triggered she entered the doors. There she found a Haitian Houngan working behind the register, they started talking about Haitian Vodou and she got invited to join his afternoon classes on the subject. At the end of the series of classes she was the only one still coming, and she had started raising questions about her own spirituality. She had also started to have particular dreams, dreams she tried to ask the Houngan about without raising his suspicion. The symbols appearing in the dream pointed to one particular Lwa, and she started to work with that Lwa alone. After a while she got the instructions on how to initiate herself through the dreams, without prior knowledge to the procedure. She talked about this dream with the houngan, who right away identified it as an initiation ritual. He accepted her into his Haitian Vodou house, and she became initiated. Now she is Manbo asagwe, but is now starting to practice Palo Mayombe, a tradition from Cuba created by Congolese descendants. She feels obliged to do this because of a lack of connection with her ancestors, she considers Palo Mayombe to be even more focused on ancestor worship than Vodou and thus practicing it will strengthen the connection. But she is not quitting Vodou, the Palo Mayombe will become added to her private practice and opening a new path in her spiritual quest.

Some of the practitioners also sought a source of empowerment and resistance, feeling stigmatized by the society, the practices gave them power and meaning to establish a reality where they felt a sense of control and self-worth.

Dr. Glover was a Karate teacher, who previously had trained members of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. In College he was exposed to eastern philosophy and mysticism, but he did not find the spirits of New Orleans before he opened up his own karate studio. The karate studio was allegedly on the location of an old burial ground and he started to see and experience ghosts around the studio. This was the first time he encountered the dead. To do something about these new challenges, he went to a Santeria priest who also conducted Palo. There he got a divination and the priest stated that Dr. Glover was to become a famous Voodoo Priest, which he did not believe at first because he was a Roman Catholic. But the priest told him that he was going to experience things that would change his mind. As a karate instructor he was invited to join a research trip to Brazil and look at Capoeira, there he got in contact with Candomble and found that the practitioners of traditional African

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9 Highest level of Female Clergy in the Vodou House.
10 Cuban Afro-Caribbean Religion
11 Syncretic religion from Brazil
religions was very warm and kind people. At this time he was viewing Christianity as promoting racism and not equality, and he was very fed up with this. After the trip to Brazil he became more interested in African religiosity and he had the chance to join a trip to Surinam, which he gladly took. When in Surinam, a jazz concert he was going to was cancelled, as chance would have it, an Obeah ceremony was scheduled that evening, way out in the wilderness. Being the adventurous type, he said, he and a friend drove off to observe the ritual. At the ceremony the Obeah priest that conducted the ritual also told him that he was going to become a Voodoo priest. Now becoming more fascinated with these religions based on African ancestry, he started to feel he had found the religions for him as an African, the religion of his people. He went to Haiti and became initiated in to Bizango, a secret Vodou society where the focus is centered on magic. He did not stay in Haiti though, and he went back to his Karate studio. But before he left he got a message from the spirits, they don’t want your religion in the United States, they only want your magic. Coming back to New Orleans, he continued to teach at his Karate studio, but in his private life he practiced Voodoo. For many years he practiced on his own in New Orleans, while experimenting with magic. He compares himself to a scientist, saying he made oils, rituals and the likes and then tested it out to see if it worked and how it worked. He is not just doing Voodoo, but take inspiration from other traditions too, for example he got an altar to Santa Muerte whom is a Mexican saint of death. He reads a lot and always try to evolve his understanding of himself, the metaphysical world and his practice. After a while he retired from teaching Karate, and now does client work were he has earned a good reputation, he thanks the experimenting in his early days for it. But he says that the work he is doing now is purely magic and not religious, it is the magic Americans want, and the results are the priority not the liturgy.

George is a Houngan Asagwe who did a lot of client work, it is his magic his clients are interested in, not his religion. But he himself says that Hoodoo and Voodoo is his magic, his tools and work, while Haitian Vodou his religion. Growing up in Alabama he knew from an early age he was gay, and as young homosexual man in Alabama he did not have an easy life. He got bullied and beaten by other people, and he did not feel safe in school. He had starting to feel hopeless and helpless in his life, but then he read a little bit about Wicca and witchcraft, so he decided to visit a local pharmacy. The pharmacy was not officially selling tools and ingredients for magical use, but he got to know the shopkeeper and was after a while

12 Highest level of male clergy in the Vodou house.
introduced to the products they had hidden in the back. This was Hoodoo and Voodoo inspired practice, and he finally found a source for power to help him. He started with magic to protect himself from people, “it worked too good” he said with a guilty smile. He don’t use saints and spirits in his magical work, just the inherited magical power of the ingredients, thus making his work closer to Hoodoo and rootwork. He takes inspiration from other traditions when it comes to rootwork, saying he finds a lot of similarities and correlations between the different traditions knowledge of herbs and roots, so it’s easy to incorporate it. Haitian Vodou is his religion, but this is more spiritual work for him and a personal devotion to the spirits, he does not mix this in with his magic. He says that doing magic with the help of spirits is much more risky, as there is debt to be paid and much greater responsibilities and consequences as they have to answer to these spirits.

The construction of reality
When talking about their life, it was clear that they saw themselves as taking their own road. They have not been conformed, they consider themselves to be special in one way or another throughout their lives, and this was a struggle until the spiritual revelation came into their life. The revelation created a context where their struggle got a deeper meaning and shows them how their uniqueness was strength. But the revelation is not so much of discovering reality, as it is the creation of a reality. In an individualistic society the power of definition rests with the individual, and this also include the definition of reality. It is creating a reality where their life and experiences is supported and also supports a greater meaning, and the society they live in has no lack of alternatives. Berger and Luckman claims that modern societies, pluralistic as it is, has a shared core universe that is taken for granted and different partial universes coexisting in a state of mutual accommodation (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 142). Diversity also implies a flow of many different relevance structures and thus makes these more spread (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 192-193). Relevance structures are what a person’s knowledge of everyday life is encompassed of, these are determined by immediate pragmatic interests and general situation in society. Relevance structures may be described as your interests and what you find relevant for your own life (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 59-60). The spiritual network is strongly based around relevance structure, as their networks are often built around shared interests. When your relevance structure overlaps with others relevance structures, in other words your interests coincides, people find each other interesting and also legitimacies the relevance structures, thus legitimating their ideas (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 59-61). As
many of the practitioners said, it started with the interest and they sought more information. Maria was even an atheist, not consciously seeking any spiritual or religious experience, she was just following an interest. But because of an overlapping reference structures she got involved with practitioners of Voodoo, which fueled her fascination, leading to integration of these ideas into her own life. In modern post-industrial societies the private sphere is often considerably de-institutionalized as compared to the public sphere (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 99), something you see clearly in New Orleans, where individualistic tendencies and being pragmatic was expected of you and something people where proud. Private sphere de-institutionalized creates an arena for the individual to create their own networks based on their relevance structure, and the network they become a part of will in turn form the individual (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 99-101). Tom had experience from other traditions and thus found elements in Voudo that was familiar to his previous experiences. The traditions shared similar concepts and principles, though with different symbols and expressions, it was non-conflicting to integrate new elements. The spiritual network of the practitioners is comprised of people who are interested and dedicated to spiritual practices, they legitimate the practitioners’ reality and the practitioner legitimates theirs. The individuals inspire each other, thus inspiring and forming the practitioner to go deeper, which in turn may connect the practitioner to other likeminded people. It’s not a cosmology or common goal, but the relevance structures are the web of the Occultic networks, personal interests and shared experiences binds the practitioners together. Individualism favors relationships based on interest, it suits the individual’s own preferences and also legitimates them.

In modern society the segmentation of institutional order, the most relevant example here is the institution of the church, and the distribution of knowledge leads to a problem of providing integrative meanings. This will encompass the society and will again create a problem to provide an overall context of objective sense for the individual’s fragmented social experience and knowledge (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 102). There is no formal public institution with responsibility of distribution of meaning, thus the individual has to create sense and meaning themselves, its not the greater societies responsibility anymore, it is expected that the individual is to find it themselves. The paramount reality are not so integrated into people’s everyday reality, it is there, but it’s encompassing and hegemonic power are not so strongly present.

With Christianity’s diminishing institutional power, the task of creating ontologies falls to the individual and social groups. If an individual does not feel that the general society shares his
or her relevance structure, they have the freedom to join other individuals who do. Thus institutional segmentation creates the possibility for creating socially segregated sub-universes of meaning. This again will mean that the relevance structures will be more individualistic among the inhabitants. When societies’ relevance structures are not generally shared, institutional order will be highly fragmented as the relevance structures will be shared by groups within the society but not the whole (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 103-105). And when the social organization of these practices is loose, the reality construction falls mostly on the individual itself. Where other practitioners legitimizes different aspects of that’s practitioner’s reality. For example if you are Catholic and a Voodoo practitioner, the Voodoo part of your network will legitimate the Voodoo aspect and the Catholic part the catholic. Individualisms respect and expectation of the individual autonomy keeps the individuals of one part from interfering with the practitioner’s engagement with the other. In the cases where for example the Christian family started to interfere with the alternative practice, telling the practitioner they had to stop, the practitioner would isolate themselves from the family as it was insulting to their individual freedom and also felt as a personal attack, since their perceived their practice as an expression of their personality.

The sub-universes have to be carried collectivity, usually the collective consists of a group that continually produces the meanings that creates objective reality (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 103). If we approach reality as a social construction, being in the world becomes to to live in a world constructed through our social relations (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 33-35). The sub-universe of the practitioners is not necessarily defined by one cosmology, but is instead based on common principles. For example that magic is a mechanism in the universe, spirits exists and everything is energy. What is natural and what is real is decided and agreed upon by a collective, and are upheld by the institutions of the society. But in the individualistic society the collective and the institutions does not have so much power over the private sphere, this again gives the individuals and social groups freedom to construct it themselves to a large extent. Since the individuals’ social interaction is so individualistic and pragmatic, it is the individual that to a large degree constructs their own reality. Also the whole milieu contains a very tolerant attitude, so the principles I mentioned earlier are the framework, the skeleton, which the practitioner can base his construction on. They feel that one definition of truth will limit their freedom, thus tolerance is a much greater virtue than unification. Ideas and knowledge are distributed through the networks, as one practitioner’s version can inspire other to reflect upon his own practice. The amended version can be spread
through the network, and giving the chance to inspire others. So the relationship between knowledge and group members is dialectic, because knowledge is a social product and a factor in social change. Thus individual pragmatism can change the agreed upon knowledge in the group as much as it changes the individual, the individual is also free to interpret the knowledge he gets from the group in his own way. But Voodoo is very different from the realities of the “normal” American, this is acknowledged by the practitioners themselves who describe their experience of living in another world than the rest of the society. A lot of the practitioners I encountered had a view of the rest of society as showing no understanding of them, fearing them or being reluctant to take them seriously. In other words they had a problem of legitimation. This because their meaning enclave are very far from the relevance structures of the rest of society, most people did not have the interest or will to engage with them. But they also understand that they cannot see the world as they do, because they have not experienced the revelation they have. The practitioners feel they live in and have evidence for a world more magical than before.

The Change of Mind
The Practitioners are aware that they have been through a change, meaning they feel as their mind has been opened. Berger and Luckmann claims that subjective reality can be transformed, being in a society means that your subjective reality is undergoing processes of modification (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 176). But these modifications are not as radical as the shift in the practitioners reality, because their transformation is subjectively apprehended as total, they are now living in a reality with spirits and magic, not in a mundane world as “everybody else”. But subjective reality can never be totally transformed by social processes, as the individual still inhabit the same body and live in the same physical universe. But in the practitioners view the transformation was total and it may appear total compared to the lesser modifications individuals encounter everyday (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 176-177). The practitioners had opened their mind and elevated their spirit. Berger and Luckmann call these transformations alternations. Alternations requires processes of re-socialization, the processes radically re-assign reality and also replicate the affective identification with the social persons that were influential during childhood, which are consisting of parents, close relatives etc.
Thus the alternation can resemble primary socialization, but they do not start from clean slates and have to cope with problems of dismantling, disintegrating the preceding nomic structure of subjective reality (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 176-177).
Most practitioner I talked to told me about their spiritual family, these were often close friends they have had for a long time, since starting with spiritual, but the spirits the practitioner were close with were also described as being part of their family. The family based terminology and associations become even clearer when looking at those initiated into houses. After the initiation the practitioner is included in spiritual kinship, containing the spirits associated with the house, the spirits of deceased members and one is also placed into a lineage. The responsibilities regarding these roles varies from house to house, but it seems that the general understanding is that they perceive each others as spiritual parents, child or siblings as they would with a biological family. You can be a part of more than one family, for example one “blood” family and one “spiritual” family, where you inherit both kinships and ancestors. Also some of the practitioners told that many people came to voodoo to find a family or the feeling of having one, and that some practitioners also had a tense relationship with their biological family.

It is often a personal interest that starts the search for knowledge, but it is not before joining a network the practitioner starts to dive into it. As you can see in the biographies, it was not until they moved to New Orleans and established relationships with other practitioners they started practicing Voodoo. Interest is not enough, there has to be a social framework that supports and encourage new ideas. Berger and Luckmann explain that Alternation has to include both conceptual and social conditions to be successful, the social conditions serves as a matrix for the conceptual. The availability of an effective plausibility structure is an important social condition. In the social base there must be an individual that the person perceives as a significant other and it is he or her who mediates the new knowledge to the individual. The individual will in the first states of transformation experience emotional dependency and thus be in a state similar to “childhood”. The significant other are there to guide them in the new reality, like parents (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 176-177). Often the person which leads them into Voodoo practices becomes their godparents, this happened to for example Zaar, Maria and Tom. The experienced practitioner takes the novice under their wing and shows them a new world. Usually they continue to be very close to that person. The world the individual is now living in finds it cognitive and affective focus in the plausibility structure. Socially it is an intense concentration of all significant interaction within the group that embodies the structure and especially to the ones assigned to do the re-socialization (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 177).

Religious conversions are very strong alterations. The past is often reinterpreted as leading up to the discovery of this new reality, like they almost knew all along in a way at this is what
she or he was really looking for all along. Or like Henri who had to get lost before the spirit found him. This is important, as all the steps from the start to the other side have to be legitimized in order for the individual to believe this. Past events and significant persons becomes reinterpreted to legitimize the new reality, it is a truth revealed (Berger & Luckmann 1975, 177-179). The journey is an important metaphor for the practitioners to identify with, because this allows their whole life to get a meaning and be a part of something bigger. It also acknowledges the fact that every person has its own journey and thus tolerance to other religious practices is essential, there is no definitive truth outside the individual. Zaar, John and other practitioners claimed they were psychic, clairvoyant or had other powers. The explanation for where they got their powers from are usually based on ancestry, either that close relative had similar power or they got it from their African or Native American ancestry. But it was not before they started with alternative religious practices that they found a network and a reality where these powers had a meaning and got a deeper understanding of how these powers operate. Others felt as outcasts in their society, and found a place for self-empowering and a network of likeminded individuals. Their struggle finally got meaning when it led them to the spiritual practices. Their biography is perceived as a linear tale where everything is meaningful in the context of them on a journey of self-discovery and evolution.

The journey
In this way they create a narrative of themselves, defining who they are. It is the experiences they have had that have shaped them, and these experiences are now interpreted as forming them when they continue on their journey. You can see how they describe their past as a bit confused, maybe lost or yearning for something. But they did not know what, and thus felt a way of homecoming when finding voodoo or other traditions. It is there they find a place, which their characteristics fit in, it is there they find soil to nurture themselves and grow. It is through this understanding that their practice is not just an expression of their religious devotion, it becomes an expression of their life. The social imaginary of the United States creates individuals that see themselves as pragmatic and completely free, and that it is “their way, or the highway”. When facing a social context that alienates them or they just don’t seem to fit in to, the social imaginary tells them to search for a community that accepts them, not to change or conform to satisfy others. The dignity of the individual lies in keeping its freedom, to define itself. Thus the roads of the occult practices, and Voodoo, suit the individual well. As the loose social control gives the practitioner freedom to express itself to a
large degree the way they want to. There are no rigid rules or laws of conduct one have to
succumb to, they have freedom to evolve the way they want to. In the modern society
individualism has chased away the authoritarian gods. There is no god or faith that dictates or
controls their life, they choose their own way. Life and reality has to be created by the
individual itself, and they are free to do so. They understand that life is a series of correlating
events and relations, but it is not premade, the path they travel are not beaten.
Chapter 5

Modern Magic

“My spiritual path is to go within myself, and find god in me and then look around me and find god in everything else, which is nature.” Dr. Glover tells me. We were sitting in a damp bar in a part of New Orleans called Mid-city. Again we met at a location surrounded by cemeteries, Dr. Glover likes it among the dead. “Voodoo is considered an earth-based religion.” He took an artistic pause “cause the way to know the creator, is through his creation. You see theology, in Christianity they try to describe God on human terms. But God is not a human he is a spirit. Right? In voodoo everything is spirit, and everything in the world has a spirit. The plant, the three, the dog, the cat, the rock! And that’s why we can use all these things in magic, ’cause it is the power of god in these things. You put these things together you manifest the power of god, which is magic! Real magic” he said satisfied. He was not alone about this view, another informant also told me some time before that voodoo is an earthly religion, its based in nature. They don’t operate with a heaven up there, separated from a world down here. Some thought God is the sum of everything or as a single entity, but either way they believe god is too big to understand, that’s why they turn to the Lwa, because they are reachable and still closer to god.
But the general understanding is that everything is a part of a sacred whole, and therefore everything is sacred. Being spiritual according to my informants implies the acknowledgement that everything and every act is spiritual, at least in how they navigate through the world.

“I would say I am a particular spiritual person, so it always kind of there with me. And my spirituality influences a lot of choices that I make.” A practitioner told me, when asked if she had any separation between daily life and religious practice. The world is sacred because the individual now defines it as such, in a way the sacredness is channeled through the individual.

**The Spiritual Mind**

Being spiritual is also to acknowledge that the world can be manipulated, and the manipulation is done by magic. Remembering the products of the spiritual shops, they are made to enhance daily life and to solve personal problems, the magic is about getting results, revealing that the practitioners understanding of magic is instrumental. Hounsi jack explained that humans are immensely small in the grand scale of the universe. The universe may have its own plan, its own journey that we have no other option than to follow. But on our scale, there is room for changes that are so small it will not influence the grand scheme. Small pockets one can manipulate, which can change your whole life but have close to no effect on god’s plan. As an example he said that if a chair stood here or there, this will not have any effect on the rest of the world, it is just in another place, but the chair have been moved, there have been a change. Magic is changing the flow of the energies, so one can tweak the streams a little in your favor, he told me.

Not every practitioner would agree that the whole universe is moving according to a grand plan, but energies as a mechanism in the universe is a general understanding, and so is the knowledge that energies can be manipulated by magic. Actually, one of the aspects that really shows the pragmatism of the tradition is it’s use of magic. Many times I was told that there was no universal moral in Voodoo, the understanding was that every action had a consequence, and the consequence was the initiator’s responsibility alone. With no universal morale, there is neither a promised heaven for the righteous, thus the practitioner is more focused on enhancing the life that is now lived. Still some of the practitioners believed personally that there existed universal morale, for example Manbo Kathy had beliefs similar to good and evil dichotomy, but this element did not exist in the tradition itself. As the practitioner implemented the elements according to their personal beliefs, the practice that is
acted out is understood as an expression of the practitioner, not the tradition itself. The meaning is channeled through the actor, the religious elements are the tools, the artist’s chisel.

**The Good Life**
The enhancing of daily life is gained through use of magic or dedicated relationships with the spirit. George used magic to fight back bullies in his youth, it had a very concrete purpose. Dr. Glover experimented with magic, to see how it worked and was most effective, he now uses it extensively in his life, as it also has become his job as he now do client work. Both examples are on each side of a scale, as George had a problem he needed a solution too, but Glover found magic first and then decided to see which problems he could solve with it. The first motivation is the most common reason for starting and practicing magic, the goal is not the magic in itself, it is to solve a problem. Turning to spell work and magic was a last resort for the practitioner, but it was an alternative.

Magic is perceived powerful, and with power comes responsibilities. The use of magic gives the individual power to control and manipulate the world, the physical and the metaphysical. Since responsibility is on the individual, this also mean it is the individual whom decides the magic’s goal. Thus there is some skepticism against magic, because there is good person and bad persons, and both have equal access to magic. Since magic is a natural force, it is available for everyone that seeks it and can be used according to an individual’s intention. The practitioner has to gain magical skills, as the outcome of uncontrolled magic is potentially disastrous.

One of the important functions Vodou houses and other groups is to teach its members the ways of magic. The vodou house and its hierarchy do not hold access to magic, but it has knowledge on how to control it. The magic is available at all times, but it is through the levels of hierarchy in the house one learns how to properly find it, use it and control it. It is the knowledge that is important, it is distribution of knowledge, creating an arena for spiritual practice where one can learn and grow in a controlled environment. But since magic is a product of natural force, solitary practitioners can and often do practice magic, but they often have a network or a group of friends they do magic with.

**The Will**
The will of the practitioner is the most important ingredient in magic according to Zaar. If the will is missing it does not matter if all the right ingredients are used or the correct words and
movements are acted out, the magic will fail. One has to manifest the will and visualize the wanted result. When lighting a candle, it is very important that one manifest an internal representation of the wanted result. Focus on the thought while lighting the candle, stare into the flame, one may also chant prayers if it helps to focus. Dolls, candles and other magic tools are not necessarily inherently magic, but they are a focus point for the mind to create the mental manifestation, visualizing where the energy should be sent. The lighting of candles is one of the most basic acts one can do, but the same principle applies to the more complex acts. During rituals one has to visualize the connection between the movements, tools and symbols, imagine the energies flow between them and also through the actor. The practitioner channels energy but also have energies in their body, one of them which will is a manifestation of. Then you have to send the energies towards a goal, you have to visualize the total connections and be conscious through the act. Without will to consciously control the energies, the outcome can range from not working at all to the release of uncontrolled energy. Houmsi jack told a story about a woman that during a ceremony called on a powerful and aggressive Lwa named Erzulie red eyes. When the Manbo of the ceremony felt the presence of the Lwa approaching she tried to stop it, telling the Lwa that they could not meet her required offerings and that they had not called on her. When the Manbo found out who called on the spirit, she kicked the women out of the house. Later that evening the woman`s house burned down, Jack is not completely sure it was a spirits work, but the timing made him suspect that it was not a coincidence. Since the energy was not pointed to any direction it struck down in her house, as a response to her carelessness.

Jack explained to me, that like throwing a basketball, it is the player who chooses the target, aims and throws the ball. Magic is like strapping a rocket to the ball, the ball will move in the direction it is thrown with more speed and power. The function of magic is to enhance ones effort. So one have to do work in the material world as well, it does not do everything for you, but it changes the flow of the energies and thus makes the circumstances more favorable towards the practitioner.

For the practitioners magic is a natural force, considered being real and powerful, and it is morally neutral. It can be used for benefit or detriment, improving lives or make harm. The ethical and moral rules are usually confined to the tradition you identify with, and the individual using it. Again one sees how moral conduct is centered around the individual, and magic is centered around enhancing the life of the individual.
The Power of Imagination
Sabina looks at magic as a set of principles of organizing the universe, a pattern that underlies all life and not as a separate, esoteric and occult category of phenomena. In this sense magic is not an escape from rationality, but it is reclamation of traditional ways of knowing that privilege the imagination. Imagination is here referred to a broad spectrum of thought processes, ranging from memory to creative problem solving to artistic expression. It is primarily relying on internal imaging and not discursive verbal expression or linear logic. “Imagination is central to human thinking and expression. Rather than being irrational – that is, not rational, or the opposite of rationality – the imagination possesses its own inner logic that complements or enhances linear thought.”(Magliocco 2004 , 97) So magical practice is one way where the logic of the imagination finds it expression, the language of the ritual gives the human imagination a way to express itself and communicates between the unconsciousness and the rational consciousness. Learning magic is to learn to discipline their imagination. It is not so much as forming the external reality than it is to form the perception of it internally. According to Magliocco practitioners believe in magic for two reasons, their definition of magic makes their beliefs rational and logical, and their personal experience support a magical worldview. The process of learning magic is the process of training the imagination, through initiations they receive instructions that prepare the imagination to experience religious ecstasy and facilitate the occurrence of psychic and paranormal events (Magliocco 2004, 100). Here you can see the alternation process as explained by Berger And Luckmann(1975, 176-177). The newly acquired worldview or tradition puts events into a framework for understanding and control it, thus they learn what events should be perceived as magical and why. The goal of magic is to provoke an emotional or affective reaction to create a change in consciousness. Magliocco argues that we should look at magic as a kind of performance art that is aimed at producing extraordinary experiences, and thus moves the individual in an emotional, not rational, way that can’t be compared to the events of daily life, but forms the individuals perspective of it (Magliocco 2004,97).

Ceremonial Experience
The House ceremonies was very performative, their main goal was to create an atmosphere to create emotional reaction. Before the ceremonies they would not give any instructions, they will just start the ritual when they were ready. Thus the first emotional reaction for a newcomer or spectator was that of confusion, this confusion only intensifies when the singing
starts and creole words one does not understand starts to fill the room. The confusion may transform into excitement, but also fear or maybe anxious, either way it is a feeling that something is going on, something is going to happen. Been caught of guard one either join or close down and just spectate the show, the exotic atmosphere, the feeling of something extraordinary is very present. But the new world that is revealed is not explained to the spectators or newcomers, it is something one has to interpret on their own in the midst of action. Thus the experience is very individual as it is the individual itself who has to fit all the new impression into his reality. During the ceremony nobody will come and tell you what to do either, so one has to imitate the members. So it is not just a psychological interpretation, but also a physical one. The meaning of the ceremony lies in each individual’s experience, the importance is in what one personally gets out of it. So after the ceremony they did not discuss abstract and religious ideas in relation to the tradition or cosmos, but they where discussing the ceremony in relation to the feelings and experience, in a very personal way. The experienced is giving new contexts for the emotions and the experience of the newcomer. In this way the experience has its foundation in the individual, but the explanation he uses to give meaning to it is set in a new context given by the members of the house. Of course, the newcomer can decide himself to integrate it, but the person is more or less changed after the event. So the ceremony is to create an atmosphere to create emotional impressions, the function of this impression is to create a mood in the practitioner and hopefully result in a transformation of consciousness. Changing of consciousness, the manipulation of the internal is a change of attitude and seeing the task in a different perspective. In practical magic, the changing of the way a person encounters the problem can make it possible to solve it more easily (Magliocco 2004, 101). Hounsi Tom loved experimenting with his consciousness, this was one of the primary reasons to attend rituals and ceremonies, he felt by doing this he became closer to the divine energies and also in a deeper contact with himself.

**Cosmological Principles**

Since belief in Magic is a set of principles that organizes and regulates the cosmos, often shared across traditions. Magliacco claims it should not be interpreted as an irrational faith in processes that violates the rules of nature, but interpreted as a fundamental way of organizing and understanding the patterns and workings of the cosmos. For Neo-Pagans, and my informants, the universe operates to a set of laws, this laws is what they call magic. Magic is working through the mechanisms of how the world is built up (Magliocco 2004, 102).
"Everything in this world has spirit" to echo Dr. Glover “You put these things together you manifest the power of god, which is magic!” Of course, Neo-Pagans does not necessarily share the same god as Dr. Glover, but the ideas and how they interact with the world is very similar, the understanding of the mechanisms, which regulate the world and the cosmos, is similar.

One of the important core mechanisms is the concept of energy. This notion is based around the scientific theory that all matter is composed of energy and that according to the laws of physics energy cannot be destroyed nor created, but it can change and transform. The practitioners believe that energy is the underlying fabric of the material world (Magliocco 2004, 104). Energy is a life force, this energy is present in all things, the universe, the animate and inanimate alike, in voodoo it is called Ashe. Manipulating this energy is the essence of magical practice. It’s these patterns and flows they have to picture in their mind.

Correspondence is very important and consistent, but not rigid. The important aspect of ritual is that all elements in the act is linked in the magician’s mind and, magic is essentially a mental activity. In Voodoo, magic works by concentrating, raising and directing energy toward a particular goal. Using the imagination, stimulating emotions, does raising the energies or moving the body, preferably you can do all three. In the ceremonies they were drumming, dancing and singing to get in the mood (as Geertz would say). It is not to reveal a truth, but to create a sense of ecstasy and contact with something bigger. Meaning for the practitioner is found in the personal reaction when meeting this experience, it’s in the practitioner’s imagination the magic happens.

The Disconnected World
Magliocco claims “Neo-Pagan magic is a self-conscious attempt to revive and re-create a sense of interconnectedness in the world, a sacredness of time and space that pagans locate in preindustrial cultures.”(Magliocco 2004, 120) She explains that like Max Weber, the practitioners also views the rise of the modernity have progressively disenchanted the world. Magliocco says that Pagans are re-enchanting the world and creating a compliment to the mechanistic philosophy of the post-enlightenment era (Magliocco 2004, 120). This was present in New Orleans too, Zaar argues that lack of connectedness between humans and nature has evolved into humans neglecting their responsibility and thus exploiting and destroying nature and the environment. To heal the world and make it strong again, humans have to start taking responsibility. The lack of responsibility was something that was
spreading into the social arena, people are not taking care of others or themselves, the ego has got to much power and they did not evolve spiritually. Though many of my informants said that ego was good and important for a strong person, you have to be balanced, too much ego is negative and unbalanced, making you spiritual blind and drunk on yourself. Zaar means that Voodoo is great because it teaches you responsibility, because whatever you do, you alone have to answer for the consequences. That is what god wants too and he believes that’s why he gave us free will. It grounds you, make you see the patterns of the world and appreciate the universe as a whole.

Dr. Glover was more concerned about the black population in the USA, connecting to their ancestral spirituality would grant them more self-respect, self-awareness and opening their minds. “They are not Africans anymore, they are Negroes” he spit, describing the contemporary black American culture being a subculture of the dominating white population who have a hegemony built upon lies. Every person should connect with their ancestral spiritual tradition he says, this to discover and connect more deeply with themselves, god and nature. Talking about the general society, Dr. Glover says that America is backwards and the society does not care about its inhabitants, that USA is founded upon manipulation and exploitation. He also saw the big organizations and institutions as a part of the racist system. He left organized Christianity because he perceived it as racist and hegemonic, he wanted to find a religious practice where the definition of him as an individual was not negatively sanctioned. His identification as an African American was very important to him, being a young adult under the African American Civil Rights movement, and wanted a symbolic and social system where this was portrayed as strength and not a weakness. He found Voodoo, where his African ancestry was seen as a source to power for him, as he perceived the tradition was flowing in his blood. He got initiated in Haiti, where most practitioners are black, he had found a black religion, where the Africans has the power. In his view he got in contact with his roots, being rooted meant that he now understood and got in deeper contact with himself, and this alone gave him a lot of personal strength. He also claimed that other’s should find the traditions of their “people”, which would give them a lot of personal strength and also a deeper understanding of the universe.

Even though many of my informants had been, still are or identified as partly Christian, there was a lot of skepticism to organized religion. Their view of the organizational Christianity is one of corruption and manipulation, that it is not Christian anymore and have abandoned their
believers in chase for more power and influence, Christianity has lost its spirituality. Another aspect is that Christianity has become too dogmatic and rigid and thus is becoming outdated and dead, to live a sacred life one has to experience and evolve as a tradition and a person and Christianity does not have the framework to do this anymore. Christianity has also lost it connection to nature and the world because of their obsession with heaven and afterlife, so it do not make the world and the lives of the people living there any better in the present. But this is change is not only in Christianity, actually the corruption of Christianity can be perceived as a symptom of the spiritual change in society itself. And the message is that humans have to reattach themselves to nature, to be spiritual is also taking its place in the universal order and supporting the balance and continuous existing of it. The “brick heads”, those who do not concern themselves with spirituality and the deeper question and mechanisms of the world, is perceived as ignorantly marching on, pushing the world over its edge. They are not perceived as bad people, but perceived as sick in a way, they are in an unhealthy state of mind. And if most individuals are unhealthy, the society is unhealthy. It is the attitude of people that has to change, and it should be closer to the attitude of the spiritual. Thus the spiritual movements have a political aspect, but it is not their main focus. They don’t do demonstrations or rallies, but they believe the spreading of knowledge and inspire others is the way change is going to happen. So instead of keeping religion in a separate sphere, spirituality is seen as a way of life that should encompass all life. Let people experience it, then they will believe it. When they believe it they will see it, and then they want to change it. It’s perceived as a whole new level of being.

Sallie Ann was deeply concerned in environmental matter that went beyond her spirituality saying that if the world were destroyed there would be no more places to practice spiritual traditions. Seeing the connectedness between everything is also to acknowledge the connection between them and the general society, not to say the world. But political agendas is not created and formed by the traditions, but it is the individual that interprets them in the context of their reality. The celebration of the history and legacy of voodoo in New Orleans and Haiti is very important for Sallie Ann, but at the same time she want to show it as a living culture, that changes, adapts and evolves. And this implies that it should meet contemporary society, not just spiritually, but also based on behavior and values. One has to acknowledge the change of context from for example Haiti to the United States. Sallie Ann is a vegan and does not sacrifice animals. This is very controversial, as animal sacrifice is perceived to be an essential part of Voodoo. Practitioners of Haitian Vodou in New Orleans say that its
corruption of the tradition, and also some New Orleans Voodoo practitioner perceives it this way. The reason for the outrage is the belief that Ashe, life force, is found in animal blood, and it is the only substance with enough potency to fuel the spirits. This example shows clearly the power of the individual when the religious community is based around principles and mechanics and not complete cosmologies. Because of the principle that everything is energy, she found a way to manipulate the religious elements to fit her veganism. Instead of sacrificing animals, she uses the knowledge of Chakra to raise the energy in the participating persons during a ritual. Chakra is derived from Indian traditions, and is now implemented in Sallie Ann’s practice as it gives meaning in her reality and also supports it. The Manbo Asagwe or Houngan Asagwe will shake the Asson, a ceremonial rattle, close to the persons chakra points, thus raising the energy in the human body. This energy is thus consumable for the spirit and gives the spirit energy to engage with the practitioner or possess them during the ceremony. She believes the energy given from the persons is the same life force, Ashe, which is found in animal blood. She admits that it is not as potent as animal blood, but it is an adequate substitute. She believes that in our society animal sacrifice is not justifiable, as animal sacrifice in the Haitian society is an essential part of meat distribution, a function it can’t possibly have in America. Where meat distribution is industrialized and the sacrificial animal is not an important source for food as it would be in the poorer rural Haiti. The Americans are detached from their food source, as they are detached from nature.

“There is no Voodoo without blood!” Zaar said when talking about the controversy, but he would not question Sallie Ann’s legitimation as a Priestess, “she do her own thing, and I do my thing”. He will keep the practice in his house, and Sallie Ann can do as she please in her house. Talking to some of the members of Sallie Ann’s house, they did not necessary share her passion for animal rights, and not all of them where vegan. But they did not feel that they had to be either to be a member of the house, as long as they respected this when they work with the house. It is this tolerance that makes it possible for the practitioners to have so diverse practices privately and still form networks and groups, they tolerate what each other do privately as long as it does not interfere with the collective practice. Here the influences of individualism shines through, one person can see another ones practice as “blasphemous”, but the sanctity of the individual is more important, thus they tolerate that they do it as long as it doesn’t interfere with their practice. There is also an understanding between the practitioners that what works for them, may not work for others. If it does not feel right, it will hardly
evolve that person spiritually, as it may be perceived by the individual that the practice is working against them. The goal is ultimately to elevate the self, not follow religious doctrines.

The Higher Self
The evolving of the spiritual self is as we have seen important for the practitioner, as discussed in Chapter two, divinity is associated with a higher self. According to many of the practitioners the Lwas are personalities and not archetypes. The different Lwa’s has their own preferences, their own goals and agendas, their own life, in this way they are described in terms of an individual. The Lwa is also perceived to be elevated spirits, and thus elevated person, they are in a way manifestation of the higher self, identifiable for their human traits but also distant in the spiritual level they now reside. But there is evidence of a sacralization of a self, as spirit is a part of every self and spirit is a divinity. Many also understood that everyone could possibly become an Lwa, in other words everyone’s spirit can have the opportunity to be elevated.

When engaging the spirits, they are perceived as individual person than authoritarian divinities. They talk to them often, nurture them with bringing offerings on a regular basis to their altars, their relationship is perceived as very human. But the most intimate of the relationships the practitioner often has is that to her master of the head. The Met Tet, or master of the head, is an Lwa that resides in your head. The different explanations on what this Met Tet really is differed greatly, but generally the understanding is that the Met Tet is revealed or putted in the practitioners head during the first initiation. The Met Tet is usually the spirit whom claims the initiate during the ritual and the spirit then becomes a part of the initiate and the initiate becomes a part of the spirit.

The revealing of ones Met Tet is an event for the practitioner, some described it that the voice in their head finally got a face. Often a certain spirit will claim a certain practitioner based on the individuals personality. The obvious link is that the spirit will claim an initiate that has a similar personality and thus share traits with the spirit, but some say also that the spirit they get may represent a part of the personality that needs to be evolved or a side of the initiates personality that the initiate was not aware of. Thus the revealing of their Met Tet is not based on obligations or status in the external world, it is almost purely seen as a personal lesson to grow on and evolve personally, it is for the individual. As the individual’s personality is in direct link with your Met Tet, it can also be understood as a spiritual legitimation of their personality.
**Spiritual Relationships**

When talking about relationships with other spirits, the practitioner often explain the relationship with “my Baron Samedi is...” and “my Oggun likes...”, thus different practitioners describes the same spirits in very different ways. The preferences of the spirits differed, even the personality of the spirits changed a bit from practitioner to practitioner, but there where some characteristics that stayed constant. Confused I asked how this can be seen as the same spirit, when they even among each other seems to discuss two different persons that just shares the same name, even though they themselves understood that this was the same person and even talked about the spirit as a close common friend. The explanation I got was that a relationship between two individuals will be unique based on the individuals that are a part of it, you will behave differently with your best friend than with your girlfriend, they are both close to you, but they will know different sides. In the same way the relationship with a spirit will be build on the communication and mutual interaction between the practitioner and the spirit. Thus the practitioners get to know different aspects of the same spirit, and again it is the practitioner itself who has the authority to define its own relationship and consequently to a degree also holds the authority to define traits and aspect of the spirits, the divinities itself.

Even though they describe their relationship with the spirits as a close friendship or maybe even as family, it is clearly an instrumental aspect to it, they know there is personal gain for those working with the spirits. “It is important that you get something back, that your not getting used by the spirits, because some of them are not fair at all”, Jack told me, indeed others also said that it was expected to get personal gain when working with the spirits. In Dr.Glovers living room a picture of a saint hang upside down, he said he did that to tease the saint and making him work faster for him. Another practitioner married an Lwa, off course this was a token for his love and devotion for the Lwa, but he also hopes the Lwa will help him in his career and general life. That his devotion and love will be repaid and have a great favorable effect on his life. Another one was marrying an Lwa to make sure the Lwa was to keep the important women in his life safe and support them. But they are very aware that they do not cheat the spirits, they have to keep the promises they make. So when giving very serious promises, for example spiritual marriage, they have a Houngan or Manbo to consult them when dealing with the spirits. The clergy`s job is to make sure that both the practitioner and the spirit understands and accepts the agreement.
The Lwa are seen as more knowledgeable, skilled and powerful than the human practitioner. They are also higher on the cosmological hierarchy, but they are also reachable and there is an understanding that they inhabit the same world as the humans. Just as humans, they are a part of this world and shares it with us, they are not distant, in fact they are very present. The personification of the Lwa and placing it in a reachable distant creates a bond to the divine that can be perceived as very “mundane”. They are their friends and allies, individuals inhabiting another level of existence. Thus they don’t see themselves as succumbing to a higher power, but they compare the devotion to their spirit as a devotion to another individual they want to have an intimate relationship with. The spirits are not their masters, they are influential characters one can establish relationships with, and this concept is pleasing for the individualist as nothing should stand over the individual. The spiritual and magical context created gives the individual opportunities to become influential too, and the spirits can and should be bargained with. “They need us too, how else are they going to experience our world, drink rum and dance with us, if they cannot possess us? It is something they greatly enjoy.” Priestess Angelina told me, note that she believes that the spirits they share the practitioner’s importance of experience, for her different entities are inhabiting different dimensions in the world, and just by working together the different entities can explore the other dimensions. Other practitioner had the understanding that they needed us to work for them in this world, to feed them, nurture them and also be a channel for them to this world. “Baron Samedi needs me, he cannot go around killing the chickens himself” Dr. Glover said, pointing to the energy giving quality of animal blood. The practitioners perceive themselves as having a very important function, “gods die when people stop worshipping them, because they need our energy and devotion”. This is based on the understanding that we are all in a symbiotic relationship, individual parts that make the whole.

**Universal Streams**  
In this chapter I have tried to show the correlation between magic and individualism, and how this in fact are complementary elements in the construction of the practitioners reality. The practitioner understands magic as the individuals tool to take control, it is one of the mechanisms of the universe, which they can use to influence their daily life and also gives them to certain degree control over the world they live in. This is important for the individualistic practitioner, because this creates a reality that gives power and control to the individual. In this regard magic serves individualism, as autonomy and authority is closely
linked and both is empowered by magic. This also creates a reality where the practitioner has influence, he is not a passive organism, but a pragmatic and active individual and he can make a change. To be able to do magic is also an implication of divine powers inherent in the individual itself, indeed, I have explored how symbolic and religious elements from Voodoo is reinterpreted and used to support and construct a spiritual reality where the self is divine. My Claim and purpose with this chapter is to present evidence that the values and understandings the practices are built on is not based on Voodoo, but on individualism and the social imaginaries of America. In this sense the spiritual journey is not a religious one, but an individualistic one. It is still the individual that is the center, and the spiritual goals are formed after the values of individualism. But the individualistic values are interpreted and expressed in the framework of Voodoo. Further more they project the individualistic values on the spiritual entities, this is evident in the way they engage with the Lwa’s and other spirits, making the values inherent in them. This makes the concept of spirit more familiar to them and also easier to engage, the cosmic order is also more apprehensible if it is build around familiar values, it makes sense to the individual, and thus meaning. It also creates a cosmic framework where everybody is conceived as individuals and thus acts and works together according to shared values, which is based upon Individualism. As the social imaginary and Berger and Luckmanns Paramount reality is so encompassing that it may be perceived as natural for the individual, it is no radical suggestion that the individual will defines it’s own reality in its terms, and thus it may also form it’s ontology. Creating a cosmological universe on the tenets of individualism, where every individual coexists and is a part of a universal whole.

This wholeness is supported through the mutual dependency as it is a of universal balance, To figure out how the practitioners understand themselves in the universe is to see how they perceive their function and relation to the rest of the universe, and that is that they are one of many parts working together to form it. In a way they look at the universe the same as Tocqueville’s Americans perceived society. Thus the religious practices can be understood in terms of the principle of self-interest rightly understood (Tocqueville, 2010; 126-129), in their mind they are connecting and working together with divine beings and also are keeping the spiritual balance in the universe and contribute to the sacred whole, but in doing so they understand and expect something back, something that should gain and serve their individual interest. Thus they see this as the underlying fabric of the universe, this is how it works. The exchanges and support between entities and individuals is what sustain cosmological order,
everybody is dependent on each other. This exchanges also keeps the energies moving, it keeps the universe ticking. Brandi told me that as a young girl she observed the religious practices of New Orleans during the holidays, old women baking bread to the saints, the lighting of candles during psalms and prayers, and the promises they gave to the saints if they where to answer their prayers. She soon understood that everything is an exchange, one gives and one takes. “It keeps a nice flow going”, she said smiling, for her, this was the basics of the universe.
Chapter 6

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I sought to understand magical and religious practice in contemporary United States. Through studying the Voodoo practices of New Orleans I hoped to find answers to my questions, and also to find out how a tradition focused on magic and Afro-Caribbean religions can survive and be practiced in a modern society as contemporary New Orleans. The questions raised were how magic could correlate with modernity and individualism, which have formed the culture of the United States, and also if the practices are formed by the traditions or an attitude formed by the greater society of America. As I have shown it is to some degree both, but the practices is mainly understood on the basis of individualistic values and the “foreign” elements is reinterpreted in terms of these values.

Being born and bread in an individualistic society, the practitioner is greatly shaped by this ideology. And as religion has lost its status as the authority of meaning distribution in public society, individuals can now to a great degree form their own religious practices according to their own preferences and needs, which they as individualistic persons do. The context created by the greater society, its social imaginary, forms a certain attitude in the individual. This attitude perceives religious practice as an expression of the individual, it is not the expression of an external god or divinity, but it is an expression of the individuals understanding of itself.

This attitude I have shown does not come from the traditions they practice, and is not confined in one of these traditions. These traditions are rather used to express these attitudes, they are in a way a product of the social structures that becomes the skeleton which religious ideas and beliefs are based around. These attitudes are influenced by individualism, in other words the religious practices are based on the premises of the individual in the center and the individual as the authority of its own truth. And because of the secularization of society, these attitudes and practices have the social room to be performed and acted out, even though they are not necessarily perceived legitimate in the general society. And also since there is not institutional distributor of meaning in the secular society, the practitioners have to create their spiritual understandings around their own values, which are formed by the Social Imaginary and greater society, the paramount reality. Thus individualism has a direct, but for the practitioner not necessarily conscious, influence on the practices.
But why Voodoo? The obvious answer is that the practitioners themselves have found a practice they deeply resonate with and has a tremendous positive effect on their life, and they experience it as very real. And as there is no organized authority in Voodoo and also the most “legitimate” form of it is practiced in a foreign country, makes it very fitting for an individualistic religious practice, as the practitioner have the possibility to define it themselves to a great degree. Also as it is a part of the local history in New Orleans, it seems “natural” to practice Voodoo in the Crescent City. As Jack, Sallie Ann and Brandi said, “Voodoo has always been practiced in New Orleans, and it should continue to be practiced here”. Also the possibility of magic in the tradition creates a world which empowers the individual, where the individual is autonomic, pragmatic and have control, magic supports and is supported by individualism, they are very compatible.

But magic is not confined to Voodoo, it is a principle shared by practitioners of different traditions. This gives me a suspicion that maybe the attitude I have describe in my practitioners also is present, and maybe even forming, practitioners of other traditions. In the same vein it would be interesting to see the practices of the spiritual traditions in other countries and regions of the world, as I suspect that some other values and expressions will be evident. Sadly, this is something I don’t do not have the time nor the space to explore in this thesis, but I leave it as a loose thread that can be picked up later. Also knowledge distribution between the cultic traditions should be explored in greater detail, as I think that an anthropological approach to the subject would be very interesting.

Lastly I want to add that my findings echoes Emile Durkheim in a peculiar way, as the Voodoo Practice in New Orleans is more an expression produced by the individualistic American society, and less an expression of a voodoo mythology or cosmology, it is individualism that is the collective reality and not a certain religion, thus as Durkheim said himself “Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities” (Durkheim 1947, 10).

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13 One of New Orleans’ many nicknames, given because of the crescent shape of mississippi river where it goes through the city.
References:

Books:


**Articles:**


