

Emerging Women

VOODOO IS IN THE CARDS IN NEW ORLEANS

By Sophia

I and my family took a vacation to New Orleans last Spring, little did I know that I was about to receive the spiritual transmission of my life, all because I do psychic readings with playing cards!

This is something I have done since I was a child. My Grandfather taught me reading tea leaves, palmistry, crystal gazing and psychic reading. My grandmother was the card reader and she passed that on to me. It was with her that I learned this tradition. She would ask me pull all the face cards in the deck and to guess what card represented who. I learned a lot this way, like what cards people look like and what their personalities were like. This was a wonderful way to practice the cards. It was a way for me to completely understand the cards. I saw how the cards related to one another and when they touched each other that one card interacted with the other cards surrounding it in a very magickal but very real way. What does it mean to have two cards that touch each other? When you think of the possibilities, it seemed endless for me. This was also my introduction to card magick and spells.(I mention in my forthcoming book, *Fortunetelling with Playing Cards*, <Llewellyn, to be published in October 1996> how to do card spells, the last chapter goes into spells indepth. My Grandfather taught me reading tea leaves, palmistry, crystal gazing and psychic reading. My grandmother was the card reader and she passed that on to me. It was with her that I learned this tradition. She would ask me pull all the face cards in the deck and to guess what card represented who. I learned a lot this way, like what cards people look like and what their personalities were like. This was a

wonderful way to practice the cards. The Queen of Clubs was my Grandmother. We spent spent hours pinpointing who was what, until I mastered that. If I could not pin point another person who showed up as one of the cards in a reading I did not have in my life (say that it was a Jack of Hearts,) my grandmother would tell me to put it on my altar to see if the person would come to me and of course they always did. It was a way for me to completely understand the cards. What was what and who it represented. I saw how the cards related to one another and when they touched each other that one card interacted with the other cards surrounding it in a very magickal but very real way. What does it mean to have two cards that touch each other? When you think of the possibilities, it seemed endless for me. This was also my introduction to card magick and spells.(I mention throughout the book how to do card spells the last chapter goes into spells indepth.)

The cab driver took us to the address of our friend, It was called the House of the Moon! "What are you going to do in this neighborhood? I wont even go into this neighbor hood. What kind of friends do you have?...Oh, now understand..." he exclaimed. It was our first hint of Voodoo. Louis' house is Large and very purple with lavender and burgundy trim. The 100 year-old gothic/victorian home with an overgrown garden had a voodoo 'veve' or symbol on a barrel on the porch and beads hung everywhere. It stood, shriekingly unique, in a residential neighborhood. Morticia Adams would have loved it. Nobody would mess with anyone around this house, we all agreed. I expected Lurch to help us with our bags, instead it was our good friends from New York City with their young son who were there also to met us. What a welcome to New Orleans! Our Occult Holiday was about to begin. My husband, Denny Sargent, has traveled around the globe researching and writing about cults and rituals. Louis, my husband's friend, is an authority on Voodoo and a priest at the largest authentic temple in New Orleans. He invited us to a practice 'drumming session' at the Voudon Spiritual Temple the next day and we went along to watch him drum and to met

some of his friends. We were led into a court yard, one building contained the High Priest and Priestess' home and the other the temple. The temple was amazing and powerful, with the various altars of different Voodoo gods and goddess's (loas) and their banners with veve symbols all over them. I should mention that Voudon (Voodoo) is a real and respected Nature religion with roots in Africa that honors many gods, goddesses and spirits. It has been very misunderstood and we found it a loving, powerful, peaceful and fantastic faith that deserves respect.

In the temple, a snake was asleep in a corner case. The bones and skeletons in shrines looked more alive than dead. The musicians started the music and began the drumming; it was hypnotic and wild. I had to decide, should I trance out or dance? My body could not make up it's mind. when the music started the whole room changed. My husband and son started to sway to the music. I started to work. Because I am a ritualistic photographer, the Hougan (High Priest) Oswan had asked me to take photographs of various alters and told me not to forget anything. While I was shooting, my husband presented him with a book he had written (Global Ritualism Llewellyn Worldwide, 1994) The Hougan loved it and looked it over and talked with my husband. They discussed rituals around the world, and then Oswan's initiation and his life in Belize and how he found his way to America. Then the Priestess Miriam arrived, beautiful and self confident in her power and her energy overtook the entire room.

The amount of power that she held was beautiful and the amazing temple became a fortress of power. What started as a practice soon became a full ritual as spirit entered her. I have Photographed and experienced many rituals and festivals, but to see one with such power was totally wonderful. She started to bring down a Loa (god) and started to dance. We were under her spell as the drumming became more frantic and as she chanted she reached for a cigar and lit it. Then she purified us all with the cigar smoke as the god Ogun possessed her. The power was amazing, we shook with the sparks! as the power leveled off, talking

resumed.

The dancing continued while my husband retreated to chat with the Hougan. As they talked about divination and rites, he mentioned to Oswan that I also knew how to read playing cards (Cartomancy). He was excited, because this was his way of divination too, and he said "It is your wife I must talk to, send her to me." When my husband told me this, I was excited. I went to chat with him and he began by saying "You know the cards too... " I had to listen closely, for I am not accustomed to listening to a heavy Belize- new Orleans accent. Then the 'test' began, he said, "So what do you get when a two of spades touches a five of hearts?"

"A slight disappointment in love," I replied. "How about in your system?" He laughed at me. "The same!" he replied. I'd never met anybody else who knew the cards in this way. "We dont have much time..." he said, so the conversation intensified. We compared reading techniques, what it means when the cards touch in different ways and how the cards can be used for spells. We discussed the differences and simularities of how we both read playing cards and where we learned. Though different, our lives and systems were parallel in many fascinating ways.

He was taught in Belize, also by oral tradition, by a Belize Priestess at the age of 17. This was the same age that I began to read the cards also. I was taught by my grandmother who is from the exotic state of Idaho. Strange that we both learned orally, yet our worlds, cultures and so on could not have been more different. I had recently finished writing a book about the subject We also discussed differences with the way we read the cards and their symbols. It is interesting to note how for us the cards pretty much meant the same things. In his system, though, he used every card in a reading. It's interesting to note that both of us used astrology in our card readings. In my system the place where the card lands is a 'house' and is then given astrological signifiers. With him it is the card that denotes astrological significance. For example, The King of Diamonds would be an Aquarian. Also, in his system different

suits have connections with animals, plants, terrain, and many other mystical symbols connected to his ancient faith. We both agreed that playing cards were more interesting to us than tarot cards!

When I asked him why he was so interested in the cards, he told me it was because he found them so mysterious. Our conversation went on for an hour and an half. He also told me how he was initiated into Voudon, and the ceremonies that he took to become a Hougon. That he had to sleep with a corpse and stay in the jungle alone all night with no protection but a magical circle. I asked him why he was telling me about all the secrets he knew about the cards. He said that I knew the value of the cards. He started to wave his hands into the air as if smoke from a cauldron was rising and disappearing. "Stir it up," he said, "stir it up," his hands rising higher and higher. After that he orally gave me an intense transmission on Cartomancy that I cannot reveal here.

Then he explained that he had transcribed all his card wisdom into a manuscript. He pulled it out and some pictures that he had drawn and instructed me where he wanted the illustrations put in his book. He told me more secrets about the cards and that it was now up to me to make sure that the oral tradition and his manuscript would not be forgotten. I promised him, like I did my grandmother, that I would keep the tradition going and alive, that I would indeed 'Stir it up.' The drumming had stopped and everything started to calm down and everyone in the temple started to come out, sweating, spaced out, drinking beer and moving around the court yard; the rain was finally stopping too.

We left to go eat dinner and we got into the spirit of New Orleans and partied at our friends house until the wee hours of the morning. Then we got a telephone call from the high priestess Miriam telling us that the Hougon Oswan was in the hospital. Heart attack. He died in a matter of hours, he was fifty three years old. I was one of the last people who talked to him in depth. Also, I was the only person to whom he told about the playing cards and his system. We were invited to the funeral service but I was

concerned about what his family and friends would think of me, an outsider to whom he entrusted secrets of the cards. I had met him!only once!

People from all over arrived two days later, in the evening at the temple. Oswan had been an important person in the community and a larger voodoo ceremony had to take place. Other priests showed up from all over and I was asked to photograph it. The temple was beautifully decorated with lights all over the courtyard and with special altars to invoke the goddesses and gods for the send off. The drumming was slow methodical and solemn people walked by and looked at the casket. Priests and priestesses came, drummed, danced and prayed. Later, Oswan's casket was moved outside to the middle of the courtyard. People danced and cried, praised him and invoked the gods. Some carried the sacred snake, image of the God Damballah, and blessed the body with it. The spirits were beautiful and the evening intense. What a wonderful way to leave, surrounded by many who loved him and all those who respected him. The High priestess, Miriam, even in her grief, was able to be strong and dignified and pull such a beautiful ceremony together. Instead of mistrust of me, there was love and expectation. I was mentioned at the funeral. Oswan was such a great teacher that he passed on to me what could have been lost forever. I was very honored. Miriam blessed and gave us love at her darkest hour, what a powerful spiritual person she is.

We stayed a couple more days longer, moving to the French Quarter with our friends, and I recorded a conversation about Oswan and what he'd told me for Louis, showed him the layout of the cards and so on. Much of this, Oswan had said, was for Lewis, It fell on him to get Oswan's book together to publish. It is amazing that the "power" of the cards laid it upon me to transmit this.

We returned home to Seattle, but at night Oswan has visited me. He asked me how I could have forgotten what picture he wanted on the cover of his book! So I have written to Louis and explained what I'd forgotten. I have always received messages

from 'the other side,' either while I am asleep or when I am in a trance state during a reading, so it does not frighten me that the dead sometimes just love to chat, my grandparents taught me to except that. I am most thankful that Oswan's Cartomancy wisdom was not lost, Louis will have his writings published and Miriam will go on to inspire others with her wisdom, power and beauty. It was an honor to met Priest Oswan and his lovely wife, and I am grateful that he found me worthy enough to past down the information he give me. His cartomancy system, like mine, will see print someday. The "moral?" Secret traditions have a power and a mind of their own and 'wise women,' of all traditions, must respect and carry on the work we are given as it comes to us. Even if it drops into our lap unexpectedly!