Hoodoo in the Gulf Coast: Empowerment and Protection during the 19th and 20th Centuries: The Black cat bone and Snakes

by

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Abstract

Hoodoo during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided African Americans with knowledge, protection, and power. Although previous scholarship has focused on the role of different charms and herbal treatments, this research shows that the Devil played a role not only in hoodoo, but in Black communities of the South. The Devil was able to provide assistance to people with the help of two specific tools; the black cat bone and snakes. Slave Narratives/ autobiographies, interviews, and WPA Narratives provide insight on the practices and the uses for the black cat bone and snakes in hoodoo rituals. Although hoodoo was constantly evolving, the Devil's role remained the same. The Devil was African Americans' source of empowerment and protection during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Introduction: What is hoodoo?

Hoodoo, according to Zora Neale Hurston, was not "drum beating and dancing…There are no moon-worshipers among the Negroes in America."[1] Hurston's statement claimed that hoodoo was neither witchcraft nor superstition; it was a culture and tradition that affected the lives of certain groups of African Americans living in the United States, specifically those living in the Gulf Coast region. Their beliefs and actions proved that hoodoo was not fetishism; instead it was a way of life.

Hoodoo is a system of beliefs that derived from Africa and further developed in the United States during the nineteenth century.[2] In the Black community, hoodoo culture restored African Americans' sense of hope and offered African Americans protection. Jeffrey Anderson argues that, "its transformation from African religion to American magic made it into a microcosm of the African American experience that combined elements of loss with a persistent drive to survive in the face of persecution.[3] This type of persecution stemmed from the period of enslavement and continued. Furthermore, hoodoo tradition was a set of beliefs and practices that enslaved Africans used in the nineteenth century, and that later African Americans used and

[1] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men,* (Bloomington, Indiana: The University of Indiana Press, 1935), 195.

[2] According to Carolyn Morrow Long, "hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork are systems of magic and therefore not capitalized." Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce* (Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 265.

[3] Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 2008), 25.

transformed in the twentieth century. This manual of hoodoo folklore beliefs guided people in the Black community toward other opportunities that involved success and empowerment. From the nineteenth century, hoodoo was a combination of beliefs from cultures in the South: African, European, and Indigenous peoples. Hoodoo culture consisted of practitioners/conjurers, clients, music, herbal remedies, clothing, and spiritual beliefs. Words such as conjure, mojo, and tricking all are synonymous in hoodoo. The only difference is that the name varies by location or ethnic background. Although some African Americans did not believe in hoodoo, hoodoo still had an influence on their lives. If people in the community did not personally encounter hoodoo, sometimes referred to as conjuring, they either knew or knew of someone who claimed to have experienced magic. As a result, hoodoo tradition continued to thrive. Hoodoo was as much a part of the spiritual world as it was a part of the physical world. Both of these worlds worked together to help sustain the Black community.

African Americans did not consider hoodoo a religion. There is no set rule, doctrine, or book for everyone who participates in this type of culture. For example, conjuring was quite different in that it lacks certain theology like most religions. Conjure was broader, and less systematic.[4] It is less systematic because there are various ways that lead to different results. For example, a conjurer doctor may provide different ingredients in a conjuring bag to relieve pain, or to overcome a loss. Enslaved Africans instead borrowed ideas and beliefs to form a culture and

[4] Jeffrey E. Anderson, Conjure in African American Society (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), x,xi.

tradition, a process known as syncretism.[5] For example, White missionaries, colonists, and masters introduced and forced enslaved Africans to learn about Christian concepts. In order for some enslaved Africans to understand and communicate with others about hoodoo, syncretism involving Christianity became an option. However, African American concepts were not always the same regarding Christian concepts. Beliefs concerning the Devil were quite different among White Christians. For example, White Christians' perceptions regarding the Devil usually had negative undertones that dealt with the Devil's character or responsibility. In contrast, enslaved Africans did not perceive the Devil in this way, but the Devil's role did not suggest that these roles were mutually exclusive. Jeffrey Anderson argues that "Black Americans during the nineteenth century essentially aligned themselves with Christianity, but conjure was a major part of their lives."[6] Conjuring continued to be a major part of African American lives during the twentieth century.

Voodoo

It is important to note that this thesis discussion of hoodoo will reference but not focus on Voodoo. Haitian ethnologist Milo Rigaud argued in 1969 that, "Voodoo is a complex religion that involves rituals and symbols that have been developed for thousands of years."[7] Along with this, Rigaud brings attention to the different ethnic groups who African Americans associated with the establishment of Voodoo. For example, African traditional religions considered some of

[5] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "*syncretism", accessed March 15, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism.

[6] Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 2008), 79.

[7] Milo Riguad, Secrets of Voodoo (San Francisco, California: City Lights Publishers, 2001), 7.

the ethnic groups as gods from different regions within Africa. The word Voodoo essentially comes from the word Vo-du, which is the language of the Fon. The Fon and other ethnic groups such as the Nagos, Igbos, Dahomeans, and Congos, were considered gods. These gods were responsible for their own interpretations of the Vodu, thus making it possible for different rites to emerge.[8] Different perceptions and interpretations of Voodoo caused the religion to spread, specifically through the slave trade.

The beliefs of Voodoo found their way to New Orleans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hirsch and Logsdon argue that the enslaved people from modern Benin were probably most responsible for the establishment of Voodoo in Louisiana, because a high number of immigrants from Haiti arrived in 1809.[9] Formally known as Dahomey, Benin is said to be the place where Voodoo and other African traditional religions originated. Hirsch and Logsdon also address the Haitian influence of Voodoo in New Orleans. The Haitian language, culture, and folklore added to the creolization of Voodoo. Louisiana meanwhile was a French territory during much of its history. Despite periods of Spanish and later American rule, historian Kodi Roberts and most other historians would agree that the people who resided in New Orleans still took on a "French cultural orientation."[10] However, Roberts asserts that, "Voodoo in American slave

[8] Ibid.

[9] Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 85.

[10] Kodi Roberts, Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans 1881-1940 in Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon's Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1992), 26.

communities had two major contributing ideologies: religious traditions of the Dahomey and religious traditions of Roman Catholicism."[11] Many practitioners found it easier to continue to establish a religion with Roman Catholicism because of the multiple similarities. Many of the deities identified in Voodoo and hoodoo strongly resemble saints in Catholicism.[21] This similarity made Voodoo thrive, which, in turn, influenced regional folklore more broadly. Voodoo soon contributed heavily to the folk tradition in the South.

Superstition?

Not all African Americans or European Americans believed in hoodoo during the nineteenth century. For White Americans, hoodoo was simply superstition practiced by "barbarians" or "savages." It was not uncommon for White Americans who did not understand hoodoo culture to make such statements. It was also not uncommon for White Americas who were Christians to reject hoodoo beliefs, as it went against their doctrine. Some African Americans did not believe in hoodoo because they considered it to be simply folklore with no meaning behind the rituals or materials used. They either heard about hoodoo and rejected it or accepted and internalized the beliefs.

Nineteenth century perspectives of hoodoo revealed the lack of knowledge concerning hoodoo culture. In *DeBow's Review* in 1861, editor J.D.B. De Bow explained the very essence of magic. He wrote, "The belief in the existence of witches, or sorcerers, I may say, it's very general among the Negroes' in this vicinity. In almost every neighborhood may be found an old

[11] Ibid.

negro women who is regarded by the other negroes with profound awe and fear, on account of her supposed possession of occult powers, by which she can, at will, bring pain and death upon her enemies."[12] Although he called the practitioner witches or sorcerers, and was a notorious racist and secessionist as well, he understood the power that African Americans had in their communities through hoodoo. Debow's stance on African magic could have originated from his stance as pro-slavery in the South.[13] By being in bondage, some White Americans believed African Americans were to be powerless; exposing their source of empowerment could suggest that they were a threat to society.

Thirty year later, Louis Pendleton, provided a more derogatory account of African spiritual beliefs:

> Mr. Philip A. Bruce tells us that the Virginia tobacco-plantation negroes, living at a convenient distance from churches, schools, and railroads are found to have as firm a belief in witchcraft as those savages of the African bush who file their teeth and perforate the cartilage of their noses. Mr. Bruce proceed to describe communities in rural Virginia, which so far resemble an African tribe as to have a professional trick-doctor, who is a person of farm more importance than a preacher, and who indeed follows a more lucrative pursuit He is often called in where the disease is of an ordinary nature, in preference to regular practitioner of the neighborhood, and such is the effect of his presence upon the minds of his patients, that the cures effected sometimes seem almost miraculous.[14]

Pendleton shared the perspective of Bruce in 1890. Bruce argued that hoodoo was a "savage" belief system amongst African Americans who not only had physical abnormalities, but

[12] James D.B. *Debow 's Review* July-Dec 1861.

[13] http://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~ras2777/amgov/debow.htm Accessed: January 10, 2016.

[14]Louis Pendleton, "Notes on Negro Folklore and witchcraft in the South," *The Journal of American Folklore*3 No. 10 (1890):201-207. http://www.jstor.org/stable/532800 Accessed: October 15, 2015.

also lacked the basic intelligence to follow a more accepted belief system. African Americans who practiced hoodoo were "savages." But Pendleton also talked about trick doctors and highlighted their special abilities. The trick doctor was better than a traditional western doctor. His responsibility was to perform miraculous care for their clients.

Scholarship of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries concerning hoodoo culture addressed syncretism, empowerment, and cultural roots. For example, nineteenth-century Blacks shared much with their African ancestors. Their spiritual hierarchies, concepts of magical specialization and human spiritual makeup, and methods of gaining occult power demonstrate the truth of this assertion in respect to conjure.[15] Historians also explained hoodoo culture as a result of African Americans empowering themselves and others in the Black community.

Jeffery E. Anderson, Robert J. Raboteau and Yvonne Chireau, for example, all explain the relationship between hoodoo and syncretism. Anderson wrote that the African American belief systems have "spectrums….at one end of the spectrum, people can find that hoodoo has a connection with nineteenth- century Voodoo and a mixture of Cuban Santeria."[5] An interesting mixture of Voodoo and Cuban Santeria made hoodoo culture unique. Raboteau discusses a similar notion concerning religion. Raboteau argues that, "the spiritual movement in the Black community essentially combines elements from Black Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Spiritualism, Voodoism and various other religious traditions."[16] This argument implied that

[15] Jeffrey E. Anderson, Conjure in African American Society (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 49.

[16] Albert Raboteau, *African-American Religion* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1999), 269.

African Americans borrowed ideas and concepts from different sections of Christianity, which indicated that religiously and spiritually, hoodoo was diverse. Yvonne Chireau adds to this discussion by stating the difference between incorporating some beliefs rather than becoming a religious practice. Chireau states, "Conjure is usually associated with magical practices, unlike Christianity, which is seen as a "religion," a dichotomy that suggests that they are in conflict with one another."[17] The difference between believers of hoodoo and non-believers is that African Americans who practiced hoodoo did not see Christianity and hoodoo in conflict with one another. For example, religious aspects, magic, and spirituality aided in the power of understanding syncretism for African Americans.

Yvonne Chireau, Carolyn Morrow Long, and Jessie Mulira Gaston explain how syncretism played a role in the utilization of charms. Long claims that "charm beliefs were a vibrant, living tradition at the time slave traders took Africans from Africa to the New World."[8] She adds that, "African magical and medicinal baths, anointing substances, fumigants, and charm assemblages are strikingly analogous to magical and medicinal substances and objects used by people of African descent in the Americas."[18] Chireau argues that not only does conjuring consist of magic, but it is also a tradition that encompasses spirituality and power. African

[17] Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 12. See also, Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 286.

[18] Carolyn Morrow Long, Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce (Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 2001) 15.

Americans used the power for healing, protection, and self-defense.[19] Charm beliefs and other spiritual remedies are evidence that African Americans carried their beliefs with them and continued to influence slave communities with these elements of power.

Gaston meanwhile provides a detailed description of charms and its effects on enslaved peoples. Gaston states that "the use of magic assisted the slaves in their time of need. Slaves used magic for multiple reasons, reasons such as love, vengeance, and protection. Magic also helped slaves deal with daily issues. They believed that magic was capable of fixing their problems. The slaves valued magic because of its psychological effects as well."[20] African Americans who practiced hoodoo used charms as an extra ingredient, one that worked well and aided them during their rituals. With this ingredient, a person would have a successful outcome and they would be satisfied.

Jeffrey Anderson provided a clear understanding from where charms originated in Africa. According to Anderson, "African charms traveled with the enslaved to America. Conjurers used charms to help elevate their success and ultimately to become influential among people in the Black community. These charms were the "minkisi" of the Kongo. "Minkisi" or "nkisi" refers to sculptures or other materials dealing with the spiritual world."[21] Although this charm had its root in Africa, it also had a European influence. The roots from Africa did not grow in the United

[19] Yvonne Chireau, Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 12.

[20] Jessie Mulira Gaston, "The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans," in Joseph E. Holloway's Africanisms in American Culture (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), 36.

[21]Martha B, Katz-Hyman and Kym S. Rice, *World of a Slave: Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2010) 216. See also; Chika Okeke, *Kongo*, 38

States, so African Americans had to use substitutes.[22] African Americans used roots during different situations from winning love to curing diseases.

This study is about some of the various ways that African Americans possessed power and skills through the Devil by using two specific tools, the black cat bone and snakes. The study also aims to show some of the various changes of hoodoo tradition and culture from parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This introductory chapter focuses more generally on the fundamental elements of hoodoo culture that include the way in which hoodoo manifested in the Black community, and how blacks and Whites responded to hoodoo culture. Those fundamental elements played a role in enslaved Africans and African Americans' survival in black communities of the South, and especially along the Gulf Cast. African American's survival in the 1930s and 1940s particularly was a result of protection and power from hoodoo culture in the past.

Variations of words, meanings, herbal treatments, and charms assisted in the survival of oral tradition. High John the Conqueror root is a notable example of a charm that provided African Americans with the tools of survival. Jeffrey Anderson argues that, "John the Conqueror root, reputably one of the most powerful of all charms and found throughout the nineteenth century south, was the American derivation of the African funza."[23] The African funza was basically a spirit found in twisted roots in the Kongo. Jim Haskins adds to this discussion by providing a detailed description of who High John the Conqueror was to the Black community.

[22]Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 61.

[23] Ibid., 39.

Haskins argues that High John the Conqueror, also known as a common folklore hero, was a southern black folk character who was most popular during slavery. African American folklorists said he came over from Africa, not as a slave, but as a spirit, accompanying the slaves to help them retain their sense of humor and their sense of hope. [24] Zora Neale Hurston wrote and claimed that High John was one of the most significant figures of hoodoo in the Black community. She stated,

> Have you thought about the fact that in every country, there is a great John?... There must be some spiritual value assigned to the name of John. That the name could be "some secret symbol" was something to speculate on. If you are interested, I will work on it with you. You can do work on the European John business, and I will continue to set down what is in the mouths of people.[25]

Hurston wanted to preserve the story of High John in the Black community. According to Deborah G. Plant, Huston learned that because High John represented power, anyone who brought the root along with them had self-confidence and a strong belief that their situation would change, with great results.[26] Although Hurston never published any work with Locke concerning High John the Conqueror, she later went on to produce one of her famous works, *Mules and Men* and an article titled, "High John De Conquer." In this article, Hurston provided a folktale that involved High John the Conqueror and his manifestation of a folklore hero to

[24]Jim Haskins, *Voodoo and Hoodoo: Their Tradition and Craft as Revealed by Actual Practitioners* (Bronx, New York: Original Publications, 1978), 151.

[25]Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit (*Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011) 93.

[26]Ibid., 93.

enslaved Africans during the nineteenth century. Hurston states that, "High John de Conquer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that. But he was not a natural man in the beginning. First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song."[27] Hurston's account indicated that High John was indeed a folklore hero who supposedly assisted enslaved Africans in a human form on the plantations. According to Hurston, once High John fulfilled his role in assisting enslaved Africans, he returned to Africa. Hurston argued that, "High John went back to Africa but managed to assist enslaved Africans by leaving his power back in America, in the form of a root, a root that can be used at any time."[28] As a result, African Americans continued to have access to this root and used it for many things such as protection and empowerment.

Chapter Two investigates the concepts of protection, folklore, status, and accessing the black cat bone. These concepts developed during the nineteenth century and further advanced into the twentieth century. For example, accessing the black cat bone was a ritual that many African Americans performed in order to bring them success, love, fortune, and luck. Depending on the location on the Gulf Coast, there were multiple ways that African Americans obtained this bone. In one example, an informant describes the process of a person wanting gambling luck. The informant stated, "in de gambling line dat yo' cud git chew a black cat but yo' have to ketch dat cat when he 'live, an put him in a pot of water an' boil him an' boil dat cat till all de meat boil off

[27] Zora Neale Hurston, "High John De Conquer" *The American Mercury*57 (October1943):450. Accessed January 10, 2016.

[28] Ibid.,452.

his bones, an' go to a runnin' stream of water an' throw him in dat water."[29] The informant also insisted that once a person completed the steps, the unnecessary bones would flow downstream, but the bone that a person needed would supposedly flow directly towards that person.[30] The black cat bone process is just one example of many informants and practitioners who followed specific instructions to obtain the bone.

Chapter Two is also concerned with explaining and discovering relationship between the Devil and the black cat bone. There are multiple examples of practitioners and conjure workers who believed that people sold their soul to the Devil in order to possess certain powers, skills, and knowledge. In one example, an informant mentioned that once a person boiled the cat, that person could form a relationship with the Devil. The informant stated, "Well yo' git dat bone an' covered it wit yo' know, set it up in a bag an put it in yore left pocket an' den yo's lucky. Den yo; done sold yo' self to de devil fo' luck."[31] Some African Americans in the 1930s described this process as if it were a reward for completing the black cat bone ritual. Therefore, selling a person's soul to the Devil would affect their lives in a positive manner. The relationship between the Devil and the black cat bone continued, but this process presented a different perspective on the Devil than the one found in Christianity.

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[29] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 94.

[30] Ibid.,94.

[31] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 78. The word "informant" is what Middleton used throughout his work. Some of the practitioners wanted to remain anonymous.

The Devil in hoodoo culture was not the biblical character in Christianity, but more of a traditional trickster. The Devil, that is to say, was a modern name that people within the Black community used to describe the "black man at the crossroads," also known as Papa Legba. In hoodoo and Voodoo, Papa Legba was the “gatekeeper” or intermediary between both the physical and spiritual worlds. He was responsible for people seeking communications with other spirits. Papa Legba was the spirit to contact before any ritual for a positive result. Papa Legba was the spirit that African Americans in the 1930s consulted with for many opportunities at the "fork of the road," or the "crossroads."

Chapter Three examines people in the Black community who wanted to gain power and success through snakes. Some people either wanted to have power for protection, or to become a powerful conjurer. African Americans who practiced hoodoo culture valued snakes because they were a symbol of power, but they also had the power to bring people closer to becoming a respected conjurer. Some practitioners say that in order to become skilled in hoodoo, one must get permission from the snake.[32] This permission would allow practitioners to become powerful, but also a chance to reveal their status in society.

Chapter Three also examines the consequences associated with snake rituals. African Americans were aware of the consequences associated with snake rituals. For example, a person claimed that “hoodoo folks is might fond of eating snakes, ‘case hit makes dem wise an’ cute; but dey don’t dar ter eat er grabeyard snake, ‘case dey ud be eatin’ de debbek hisself an’ he

[32] Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Champaign, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 2009), 146.

couldn't he'p 'em no more.[33]" In this situation, African Americans associated the snake with the Devil. Not all African Americans wanted to possess the power of the Devil, but those who did, knew of the various opportunities and life changes that could occur if they were to immerse themselves in that type of ritual.

The primary sources used for this thesis deal with both Black and White perspectives and include interviews of practitioners, sometimes referred to as informants. Between 1936 and 1940, Harry Middleton Hyatt, an Anglican minister, notably collected thousands of interviews from African Americans and Whites immersed in hoodoo and Voodoo culture in the South. The interviews addressed topics ranging from root work and conjuration to witchcraft. Each interview is different because of the different locations, but taken together they demonstrate hoodoo practitioners' and clients' belief systems and the strength of oral tradition. What these interviews offer is an opportunity to view the changes of hoodoo culture in the South. What enslaved Africans practiced in the nineteenth century south is slightly different from what some African Americans practiced in the 1930s south. For example, enslaved Africans used John the Conqueror root against flogging. In the twentieth century, African Americans used the root for various situations including establishing a business.

Folklore, slave narratives/autobiographies and WPA Narratives are other primary sources that add to the understanding of hoodoo culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Folklore from late nineteenth century, until the twentieth century, reveals the strength of oral tradition in Black communities of the South. Folklore adjusted to the changing of time and

[33] Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk beliefs of the southern Negro* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press), 552.

culture in the Gulf Coast. Furthermore, slave narratives/autobiographies, aid in understanding the reasons for enslaved Africans using African magic. African magic manifested in hoodoo culture during the 1930s and 1940s and influenced their lives greatly. Other slave narratives/autobiographies also provide different perspectives on hoodoo beliefs. Not all enslaved or former slaves believed in hoodoo and its abilities to provide protection and power. Furthermore, The Works Progress Administration Narratives of the 1930s are useful to this research because they add a perspective on hoodoo culture. African Americans interviewed either were former slaves, or remembered slave stories told to them in their childhood. All of these sources add to the evidence of hoodoo culture as a culture of restorative power and protection.

Secondary sources consulted for this research describe different beliefs of hoodoo establishment. Scholars argue about hoodoo's abilities, where hoodoo originated, and how it affected people in the Black community. They also provide examples of different rituals that influenced African American beliefs relating to power, luck, success, and love. Songs of the 1930s are also valuable to this research. The lyrics and content not only demonstrate the strength of folklore, but also the seriousness and uniqueness of the artist.

What remains missing from scholarship is a full understanding of how the Devil, through animals, contributed to the empowerment and protection of African Americans. This type of protection and power was distributed throughout Black communities from the nineteenth until its peak in the twentieth century. Hoodoo during the nineteenth century did not remain static, it was constantly changing.

African Influence

Understanding basic African beliefs is vital in order to interpret hoodoo culture and traditions. Scholars have argued that not only is there a physical resemblance between different medicines and roots found in Black magic, but also different beliefs and theories. For example, Chireau wrote that, "concepts of divinity theories concerning cause, effect, and the responsiveness of spiritual forces to human will- have informed expressions of black American religion and magic."[34] Ethnic groups of West and Central African religious systems explained different events and life cycles in magic. Ultimately, their belief system was capable of keeping a balance between the physical and spiritual.

To Africans, there was no distinction between the secular and sacred, or good and evil. Katrina Donald insists that African Americans perceived good and evil differently according to culture. Donald argues that, "to see the earth in two different ways was not what some African Americans believed. To them, it was probably offensive to do so."[35] Donald also points out that daily life activities were a part of their religion, helping women, men, and children work together. If a person fell unexpectedly ill, a ritual would take place in order to help restore that person's balance.[36] With African traditional religions, individuals believed in fate that was predetermined, but also that the fate of a person could change with the help of a divine

[34] Yvonne Chireau, Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 37.

[35] Katrina Hazzard Donald, Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 21.

[36] Ibid.

trickster.[37] Furthermore, a trickster could take any form, including appearing as a child or a deity. The trickster appearing as a child or a deity helped people with their problems and gave them strength.

The Gulf Coast: Early Colonial Period

The enslaved population in the Gulf Coast contributed to the growing population and commercialization of the South. According to Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education, "It is well known in Louisiana that many a cargo of slaves from Africa was landed on the Gulf Coast soon after the portion of our national domain was purchased from France, and that this traffic in human flesh was stealthily kept up for some years after the war of 1812."[38] Lippincott's Magazine sheds light on the development of the Black community in the Gulf Coast. In major cities such as New Orleans, Debow claimed that, "no city of the world has ever advanced as a mart of commerce with gigantic and rapid strides as New Orleans."[39] Both assertions show that the steady growth of a population of enslaved Africans had an influence on the development of the city. For example, Andrew J. Torget argued that, "the rise of the economic power in places such as Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana contributed to the

[37] Jim Haskins, Voodoo and Hoodoo: Their Tradition and Craft as Revealed by Actual Practitioners (Bronx, New York: Original Publications, 1978), 31-32.

[38] Thaddeus Norris, "Negro Superstitions" *Lippincott's Magazine 6* (July1870), 92.

[39] Quoted in David Goldfields' *Region, Race and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1997), 196.

demand of cotton farms, which affected territories surrounding northern New Spain."[40] This statement is an example of how slavery benefited the United States during the nineteenth century. It was the labor from enslaved Africans that caused the growth in population and the rise of the cotton industry.

The cotton industry fueled the need for African slaves. James Walvin argues that, "It was cotton that powered the rise of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, but it was in New Orleans and Mobile that some of the most enduring images of slavery developed."[41] Walvin's argument suggests that hardship and injustices were brought upon enslaved Africans for financial gain. He also mentioned that in areas such as Mobile, horrific situations occurred regarding enslaved Africans. Some of those terrible instances involved auction blocks and the selling of enslaved Africans to distant lands. What enslaved Africans experienced was far more than horrific; they experienced their lives and culture being stripped from them. As a result, what enslaved Africans learned from their ancestors was well needed in order to protect and empower themselves. One way to make sure that they had close ties to African spirituality was through folklore.

Not everyone believed in the power of hoodoo and folklore, some believed that hoodoo beliefs were superstition. Thaddeus Norris wrote about his perspective on African magic. He states,

> We find in our cities, even at the present day, amongst people of intelligence and culture, minds have a strong tendency to superstition; and if we could look over a record of the names of those who stealthily

[40] Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 258.

[41] James Walvin, *Atlas of Slavery* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2005), 110.

> visit fortune-tellers, we might lose faith in the right mindedness of some of our intimate acquaintances...The more refined a people, the more interesting its mythical legends. Those of the Caucasian race are attractive; while those of the negroes are repulsive., especially when connected with their heathenish religions. An extenuation for slavery put forth by many Southerners is, that the negro is modified, his nature softened, by associations with the white man: I might add that his superstitions are humanized also.[42]

Norris' belief about "Negroes" and their religion was an example of what some people, outside of hoodoo culture, thought about conjuration, root work, or magic. He believed that the white race was superior and more logical. Whites could make the distinction between superstition and reality that African Americans could not. "The more refined a people," he added, "the more interesting its mythical legends." This statement suggests that an individual who is intelligent, could not fully become immersed in hoodoo culture, but only be entertained by it. According to Norris, Hoodoo was regarded as a "heathenish religion."

Norris also mentioned the peculiar institution and the extenuation process, which further helped African Americans become more "civilized." However, slavery was able to produce and extend the relationship of spirituality. Spirituality was a connection that African Americans cherished during slavery. As a result, their beliefs about hoodoo developed out of the response to slavery and the injustices that followed. Jeffrey Anderson argues that the conjure system, which gave life to the hoodoo tradition, was able to thrive and survive on the basis of receiving justice.[43] African Americans sought out different ways to receive justice of practicing rituals and accepting

[42]Thaddeus Norris, "Negro Superstitions" *Lippincott's Magazine 6* (July1870), 92.

[43]Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 10.

herbal remedies to heal and manipulate their situations. Receiving justice could imply that vengeance was acceptable and needed.

Yet White Americans participated in hoodoo culture when it proved to be beneficial to their personal agendas. Mary Alicia Owen talked about her experience dealing with her aunt Mymee losing her "luck ball." A luck ball was similar to a conjuring bag, probably similar to gris gris. Gris Gris was another name for a conjure bag in Voodoo rituals. Conjuring bags usually contained different powders, roots, and other ingredients to assist clients with their specific needs. Losing the luck ball caused aunt Mymee to fall ill. Nevertheless, this account brings attention to Owen eventually experimenting with conjuring as a young White woman by way of her family's Black servants. While engaging in conversations with the Black servants, Owen heard about an African American man named King Alex, a celebrated conjurer who supposedly had the strength to assist anyone in trouble. Owen described King Alex as a respectable individual. She wrote, " This A---was a curious half-barbarian, who never stayed long in a place, made his entrances secretly and mysteriously in the night, never confided in any one, never spent money for anything but whiskey, never lacked for the good things of this world, and never was reduced to the inconvenience of begging or stealing, although he was as the lilies of the field "that toil not, neither do they spin."[44] Owen's description of King Alex as a half-barbarian indicates that she believed that the religion was "barbarian," but he also had power and thus status.

[44] Mary Alicia Owen, *Voodoo Tales as Told among the Negroes of the Southwest* (New York: G.P. Putman, 1893), 171.

Owen's description of King Alex was not uncommon among outsiders. Words such as "half-barbarian" could suggest that he was a barbarian because of his race. It was only half because he possessed a powerful skill that some people possibly feared. She also goes into detail about his personal life, and opportunities which could have only been granted because of his reputation and skill. For example, Owen states, "No cabin refused him shelter and the best bed and food it could afford. No one knew whence he came or whither he was going...How he came was a matter of conjecture; it was generally conceded that he travelled at his ease on some strange steed of the Devil's providing."[45] What Owen ultimately argues is that King Alex had this amount of power because of the Devil and his reputation in the community.

Enslaved Africans or African Americans who associated power with conjuring frightened some people in the White community. To have power because of African magic was not beneficial to slave masters or other Whites. African magic was not beneficial because people in the White community feared that enslaved Africans could possibly harm or even kill them. In the case of slave rebellions, some people considered Nat Turner to be a conjurer, who rebelled against the peculiar institution. Turner, a preacher on a Virginia plantation, did not agree with the type of treatment he and other slaves received during slavery. As a result, Nat Turner sought vengeance. He, along with other slaves, stood up to their masters and violently killed a portion of the White community. Turner believed that he was destined for this type of leadership, and he was born with a duty that he had to fulfill in order to save himself and other African Americans

[45]Ibid.

in bondage.[46] African Americans also considered Turner a conjurer because like most conjurers, he received instructions from the gods. Like Turner and many other enslaved peoples, associating themselves with conjuring meant more than just magic; it meant a chance at survival and status. However, associating Nat Turner with African magic is not to diminish his role in one of the most-known slave rebellions in the South. Instead, associating Nat Turner with this power explores the possibility of Nat Turner involvement in hoodoo culture.

The Development of Folklore

Folklore in the American South affected the manifestation of hoodoo and oral tradition. Levin states that "Euro-American tales of the South heavily influenced African American folklore. African Americans adopted the tales' meanings and their captivating effect. African Americans were able to have a strong connection with Euro-American tales because they were reminiscent of their deep roots in Africa."[47] For example, many African born slaves relied on oral tradition in order to sustain their well-being. Levine argues that, "enslaved Africans had connections to conjuring and magic from Africa. The folktales represented their struggles and their aims to return to their homeland, no matter the mistreatment."[48] Levine's argument demonstrates not only the power of oral tradition, but a common feeling among enslaved

[46] Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A compilation of Source Material, Including the Full Text of The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), Nat Turner was a possible practitioner, very similar to what people thought about the Haitian Revolution, a conjurer who started the rebellion.

[47] Lawrence W. Levin, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 82.

[48] Ibid., 87.

Africans. A common folklore story changed some African American's outlook on resilience and endurance. It gave them strength, especially folklore that involved the Devil.

In other folklore, High John and the Devil had issues with power.

> High John eloped with the Devil's daughter. The Devil pursued them and, when they met, High John tore off one of the Devil's arms and almost beat him to death with it. Before he left hell he passed out ice water to everyone and turned the dampers down so that when they returned to visit his in-laws the place wouldn't be so hot.[49]

This story is symbolic in the way that High John is battling the Devil. This story could have brought attention to enslaved Africans wanting power to defeat the injustices of enslavement brought on by white colonists and masters in the colonial era. In addition, Zora Neal Hurston provided a different perspective between God and the Devil. In Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "High John De Conquer," Hurston states that, "ole massa, God, and the Devil are highly symbolic characters in mythology of High John de Conqueror. God and the Devil represent transcendent spirit. For in High John tale, as in other folktales, the Devil and God are equals."[50] Hurston's argument indicates that the Devil was essentially on the same level as God. The same level would mean that some African Americans perceived the Devil as a highly influential spirit.

Gulf Coast: 1930s

[49] Richard Dorson, *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 1956), 84-85.

[50]Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit (*Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 93.

African Americans in the early twentieth century yet again faced hardships that affected their communities. Lynch mobs and worker unions emerged all over the South. According to Neil A. Wynn, "significant as the political changes of the 1930s were a growing sense of group consciousness and a resurgent spirit reflective of the earlier "New Negro" also characterized the decade."[51] The whole idea of the New Negro and the New South established a different meaning for African American life. Gabriel A Briggs argued that, "The New South created a paradoxical context wherein African Americans shared constitutional freedoms, unknown to previous generations and enforced by an Old South regime under a new name, which sought to limit and fix the position of African Americans in southern society."[52] The government had to find different ways to hinder African Americans from advancing economically, socially, and intellectually. One way the government did this was by condemning other beliefs and tried to force others to believe in the mainstream customs. The governmental force caused some African Americans to not believe or fully believe in the power of hoodoo. Some African Americans did not believe in hoodoo because they considered it to be simply folklore. They either heard about hoodoo and rejected it, or received and internalized the beliefs.

In Mississippi, for example, Mandy Jones did not internalize and accept hoodoo beliefs. She stated that, "No chile, I has heered of hoodoos, but I don' believe in 'em. I ain' skeereed any sich. We wasn't raised to be skeered of 'em at our place. When any of us was sick, our white

[51] Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 19.

[52] Gabriel A. Briggs, *The New Negro in the Old South* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015) acknowledgments section.

folkses doctor come an' looked atter us."[53] Jones' statement brings attention to two concepts: empowerment and status. Jones did not believe in the "hoodoos" nor did she fear them because she was not exposed to hoodoo culture. What is evident is that Jones's family upbringing had a lot to do with her personal beliefs. African Americans who were immersed in hoodoo culture probably also received these beliefs from childhood. When African Americans believed in the power of hoodoo, they resorted to practitioners or conjure doctors, rather than western medicine. Practitioners had status and power within the Black community. Preferring a White doctor over a Black doctor was not surprising. Some people in the Black community preferred western medicine over "African magic."[54] Preferring African magic to western medicine was not uncommon or surprising either. However, some African Americans could not afford western medicine, and some did not trust white doctors because of harsh medical treatments.

Henry Garry is another example of someone who shared his experience with conjuring and beliefs on superstition. Garry admitted that people in Gainsville did not quite understand hoodoo culture, but his mother did. "Mh mamy wouldn' let us tote a axe on our sholder th'ough de house, an' she wouldn' low umbrella to be opened in de ousem say hit bring bad luck...She put a ball of azzifittit on a string an' make all us chilln wear it 'roun our neck to keel off sickness."[55]

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[53] Herbert C. Covey, *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-herbal Treatments* (Lanham, Maryland: Roman and Littlefield, 2007), 68. See also*; Andrew* Ward's *The Slaves' War: The Civil War in the Words of Former Slaves,* 332.

[54] Herbert C. Covey, *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-herbal Treatments* (Lanham, Maryland: Roman and Littlefield, 2007), 68. See also; Andrew Ward's *The Slaves' War: The Civil War in the Words of Former Slaves,*332,*WPA Slave Narratives, Mississippi,* One has to take in account that the location could have much to do with people believing or not believing in hoodoo.

[55] Ibid.,68.

Garry's experience is quite different from Mandy Jones's and her disbelief. His mother was responsible for exposing hoodoo beliefs to her children. It was common for children to accept their parent's hoodoo beliefs. Henry Garry's experience is only one example of people believing in hoodoo. Believing also played a role in hoodoo being able to thrive in Black communities.

Folklore was able to thrive because of the practitioners and their special abilities. For example, some practitioners believed that they had the ability to fly, to change their appearance at will, to control the weather, or to connect with their ancestors. Communicating with their ancestors was an exceptional ability because it meant that the advice that they were providing came from a spiritual source. One type of advice and knowledge that they received from their ancestors was how to protect themselves. The slaves protected themselves from some of the worst experiences by providing their families with a sense of comfort through trickster tales. As mentioned earlier, tricksters could be in the form of a deity or a person who was widely known in folklore tales. Levine argues that "like Brer Rabbit, slaves learned to maneuver as well as they could from their position of weakness."[56] It was as if the trickster tales provided them with strength and resilience in the South.

The WPA narratives provided different stories regarding enslaved conjurers and their powers/abilities. For example, a former slave named Patsy Moses in Texas stated that, "Yes, de ole voodoo an conjure doctors was de ones dat had de mos' power hit seemed over de nigger in de days befo' an after dey free."[57] The status of the conjurer essentially gained the respect of

[56] Lawrence W. Levin, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.

[57] WPA Narratives, Patsy Moses born 1863 in Texas. http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/163/163.pdf

many slaves while on plantations. Moses added, "I dismember his name, dey talk 'bout him w'en I was little an'tell 'bout de things dat he did. Sometimes he would have a meetin' place in secret, w'en dey cum ter git him ter work de evil charms on de enemies." Slaves would often go to secret places in order to hide their work and to protect themselves and their clients from harm. Moses also described the atmosphere of these secret places. For instance, Moses mentions enemies suddenly falling ill with sickness, practitioners facilitating ceremonies different types of dances, and the types of clothing that they practitioners wore.[58] Enslaved people meeting in secret places and the type of clothing that they wore was another way to express and to distinguish themselves from other enslaved Africans.

Conjurer's clothing made them distinguishable from people, but their clothing also represented a higher status. In addition, practitioners had other physical traits that made them stand apart from other slaves. Chireau wrote that, "a fascinating enumeration of bodily deformities particular to conjure specialists, such as distinguishing birthmarks or abnormalities such as harelips, red eyes, or eyes of different colors, have been noted by observers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[59] Having these physical abnormalities or distinctions added to practitioners, status and craft. One of their crafts included utilizing High John the Conqueror root.

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[58] WPA Narratives, Patsy Moses: she gives descriptions of the practitioners, she tells a story about two, and one wore a black coat, "like de preachers wear."http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/163/163.pdf

[59]Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 21.

High John's character proved to be powerful in that stories transformed into special charms such as High John the Conqueror root. In the 1800s, slave narratives exposed different ways that charms aided people during hardships. For example, enslaved Africans used High John the Conqueror root against flogging as a means of protection. For example, abolitionist Henry Bibb wrote about using a root referred to him for protection. Bibb needed protection because he continued to run away from the plantation. One of the many consequences for running away was flogging. Bibb was fearful of a whipping, and others advised him to visit a conjurer to escape the beating. Bibb stated that the practitioner agreed to help, but only if he paid him a certain amount of money. Eventually, the practitioner gave Bibb powder and other ingredients that would prevent the beating. Bibb states, "He also gave me some kind of bitter root chew, and spit it towards him, which would certainly prevent my being flogged. According to order I used his remedy, and for some cause I was let pass without being flogged that time."[60] Although Bibb did not specify exactly the name of this bitter root, the nature of the root suggests that what Bibb used was probably High John the Conqueror root.

In the 1930s, High John the Conqueror root's role changed from protection against flogging to empowerment. A practitioner claimed that, if a person wanted to receive money, the root would offer success:

> If you wanta conker a white man, or you now, like any business, want him to do a favor for you or borrow money from you [him], say you just get some of that John de Conker root, they say, and chew it and spit-spit all around him. Now, here, just like if you spittin'- and say you spittin' nine times.

[60] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb: An American Slave* (New York, 1849), 26.

> They say you'll get any amount of money from him that you want to.[61]

This example is evidence that the role of the root changed. Practitioners now claimed that using the root would help manipulate the system in order to receive money from a White person. This account could also suggest that the white man represented success, and in order to get that type of success, African Americans needed John the Conqueror root.

John the Conqueror root was available in most of these geographic regions. Many materials were popular in both Latin and American cultural areas. The best examples of such materials were High John the Conqueror root and black cat bones, whose powers were respected throughout the south by the end of the nineteenth century.[62] The black cat bone was often used in combination with John the Conqueror root to have a successful outcome. Anderson claims that using plants and animal products is of African origin, especially the ritual involving the black cat bone and its power of invisibility.[63] A practitioner stated,

> Yo' take dat bone an' yo' git chew some steel dust an yo' git yo' some John de Conker, but yo' git de powder John de Conker, not de root...An yo' put dat black cat bone an' John de Conker an' yo' take de 27th chapter of Job..take dat black cat bone an' yo take a silver dime-take dat black cat bone..Yo' take yo' dat John de Conker an' put it in a bag wit a piece of red flannel an' yo' sew dat. Put dat silver dime in dere too...Yo' take dat an' put it in yore pocket on yore left side. Yo' go dere an', if yo' sentence

[61] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 594.

[62] Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 106.

[63] Ibid., 41.

> fo' de pen, dey gon'a sentence yo' fo' de pen. Yo take dat an' yo know whut chure gon'a make yore wish to dat[64]

The practitioner informed Hyatt of the multiple ways that the black cat bone and John the Conqueror root could benefit people. The practitioner then gives an example of a person who had to face a judge. If the person followed the instructions of the black cat bone ritual, then the judge would eventually turn that person loose.[65] The bone thus was useful for those people convicted of crimes who felt as though the charge was unreasonable and unjust.

African Americans' spiritual beliefs continued to progress throughout generations in the Gulf Coast. Old folktales told in their homeland were also the same tales that arrived in the United States during the enslavement period. Charms and herbal remedies were vital to the survival of hoodoo culture. African Americans worked diligently to ensure that they could secure protection. Protecting themselves with the use of magic came naturally and continued to have an effect on their lives. Folklore and hoodoo taught African Americans that in order to survive, African magic was the key to empowerment and protection.

[64] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 1068.

[65] Ibid.,1068.

The Black Cat Bone

The focus of this chapter is to not only determine the Devil's role within hoodoo culture, but to reveal how African Americans perceived the Devil during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The chapter specifically examines the role of the Devil through the black cat bone, an object that can generate success and luck for anyone who uses it properly during the appropriate ritual. The fears and oral tradition surrounding the Devil were confusing to some people in Black and White communities. The black cat bone narratives from the past reveal deep perceptions of the Devil's power. The narratives also demonstrate the determination of the hoodoo practitioners to harness power to manipulate their situations. There are common beliefs within hoodoo culture surrounding both the bone and the Devil. Yet African Americans in hoodoo culture accepted the role of Devil and the black cat bone. While others believed that anyone who was involved with this ritual was evil. One practitioner claimed that, "the trouble and luck is that a man who was involved in hoodoo, automatically signs up wid de debbil, he kin hoodoo an' do ennything he wants in diseyere world, but he sho' done took his part outer de kingdom."[66] Yet involvement with the Devil through hoodoo could also improve one's quality of life.

The Devil as understood in Christianity should not be confused with the Devil in hoodoo culture. Oldridge argues that "in Christianity, as the personification of all that is believed to be

[66] Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk beliefs of the southern Negro* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press), 257.

wicked, the Devil, can serve as the composite for everything that an individual or a community rejects. He is kind of a black mirror. The Devil is the enemy of people who believe in God. Oldridge goes on to say that "the problem of evil only emerged with the appearance of an entirely benevolent Creator."[67] Because Christians saw God as a creator who was forgiving, kind, and loving, the Devil could not have the same role, He had the opposite.[68] During enslavement, Christianity further reinforced the White communities' ideas and notions about the Devil. African Americans perceived the knowledge that the preachers and masters conveyed to the Black community differently. According to Clyde McQueen, "Christian descriptions of the Devil resembled trickster spirits in West African folklore, and God's angels seemed powerful West African spirits."[69] By the nineteenth century, African Americans' ideas about who the trickster was, as well as certain characteristics concerning this trickster, were already developed.

Both traditional and modern views of the Devil help with understanding Christianity during enslavement. For example, slave trader/masters and missionaries introduced Christianity to the Black community upon arrival in the colonies and after, especially during the Great Awakening, as a control mechanism. Although some enslaved Africans were aware of Catholicism upon arrival, others were not. Therefore, the establishment of religion in enslaved societies contributed to their personal beliefs about the Devil. Yet Gayraud Wilmore argues that

[67] Ibid., 4.

[68] Ibid., 45.

[69] Clyde McQueen, *Black Churches in Texas: A Guide to Historic Congregation*s (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 6.

in order for Christianity to work in the Black community during slavery, missionaries also had to establish a foundation that included spirituality similar to what Africans practiced.[70] Many Africans retained their knowledge of African spiritual beliefs and carried ancestral religions with them.

Christians believed that the Devil preyed on the weak and weary. Christians believed that the Devil was well aware of people's misfortunes and used those situations to his advantage. The Devil was everything evil and God was everything good. Some Christians believed the Devil was vile and unnatural as well. Dismissing the Devil and his power would go against some Christians' understanding of his role in Christianity. The philosopher Gordon Graham contended that the traditional Christian model of spiritual forces of good and evil provides a framework that better explains both the existence and the nature of evil.[71] The existence and the nature of evil affected how some people viewed the Devil.

In the mid-1930s, Harry Middleton Hyatt interviewed one hoodoo practitioner who said:

> They claim that you go to the fork of the road fo' nine mornin straight. You walk backward. You curse the day you were born. You curse the sun, the moon. You curse God. Then they'll sell theirself to the devil. The ninth mornin' they'll take a black cat to de fork of that road an' they'll t'row him down in that water an' let them cook to pieces. An' they'll take a-somepin, an' they'll fin' one of them bones, an' they'll call that the black cat bone. An' they sell theirself to the devil an' they be able to do all kin' of matter.[72]

[70] Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1995), 116.

[71] Ibid., 93.

[72] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 82.

Several questions arise from this statement. Questions such as how did African Americans' perceive the Devil in hoodoo culture? What was the significance of selling one's soul? Active participation in a ritual was a serious component of the process in hoodoo tradition. To an outsider unfamiliar with the culture, expressions, and attitudes of the hoodoo world, seeking a compact with the Devil or selling one's soul could translate into going against Christianity. The cursing of the moon, sun, and God ritual can imply that it is Anti-Christian ritual worship, but it was not. It was a way to build a relationship with the Devil. God was not the focus here; rather it was the Devil, a powerful being.

The practitioner went on to explain one way to transform a person's situation with the help of the black cat bone. In order to do that, the Devil had to be present or conjured during the ritual. Contrary to the beliefs of mainstream Christianity, African Americans conjured his power not to wish harm on another individual, but to harness that power. While the belief abated somewhat over time, in the twentieth century, many African Americans still used the bone for love, success, and for better finances. The knowledge and power that the Devil embodied could eventually give them a certain "freedom" that God could not offer.

Black cat bone rituals took place in the context of wider societal views concerning the Devil. As both an abstract idea and as a real or imaginary character, the Devil haunted western societies. Darren Oldridge wrote that in the past, some individuals saw the Devil as "the enemy of goodness and life, or a kind of vicious emptiness."[73] In other cases, people viewed God as the spiritual being of the light, with a positive connotation, while the Devil was the complete

[73] Darren Oldridge, *The Devil: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), *2.*

opposite of that, a spiritual being of the dark with negative undertones. The Devil was a character to be feared in the Christian community.

Two related notions concerning the Devil in hoodoo culture were the forks of the road and selling one's soul. The forks of the road was not just symbolic; many African Americans went to the "forks of the road" or the "crossroads" to establish their relationship with the Devil. The selling of one's soul during this process was not only to receive power to "be able to do all kin' of matter," but as a mechanism of exchange for power. For example, a hoodoo informant described the fork of the road as "practically two ways."[74] The Devil did not give away power for free. For his services, a soul must be given, and thus both the individual and the Devil gained something.

The majority of African Americans in hoodoo culture believed that the forks of the road were a way to learn about gaining skills. However, a practitioner stated that, " wen yo' git in touch wit de fo'k at the road, yo' gittin' in touch wit a whole lot, mah boy." [75]

> You go out to de forks of de roads-dat's if you wan'a learn how to do somepin. You might wan'a learn how to be a-maybe a conjurin' person, or you might wan'a learn how to be a-some kin' of an officah or somepin, or you might wan'a learn how to be a good gamblah. Nobody can' tell w'a' choo got in view. You make up your mind an' say, "Well, ah'm goin' out to de forks of de road."[76]

If a person was desperate enough or interested in learning something new, the forks of the road was the right location. The practitioner mentioned that "you make up your mind,"

[74]Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 2842.

[75] Ibid., 1067.

[76] Ibid.

indicating that a person was not forced to go, but some willingly made the decision to go to the forks of the road. Although the Devil is not referenced in this narrative, we can infer that in order for the process to work, one has to meet with the Devil and sell one's soul for positive results. The reason for this is that multiple interviews mention that the forks of the road were responsible for the Devil fulfilling their desires.

Hoodoo informants described the forks of the road as instant access to the Devil. In Jacksonville, Florida, a hoodoo informant provided Hyatt with information concerning the forks of the road. The informant stated, "They says after twelve, at exactly twelve, 'clock on Friday night, you go to a crossroads, any crossroads, and there you are to kneel down and say you make vow to stay wit de devil and do whatever he wants yo' to do."[77] The informant also claimed that this was the exact place to be in contact with the Devil. In order to change, or to go through a process of reform, the crossroads was the place for that process.[78] African Americans in hoodoo culture were aware of this process, and took advantage of the opportunity.

African Americans also used the color black to describe the Devil and his position at the fork of the road. For instance, an individual claimed that, "Black, of course stands for the Devil: yo'll see a man appear to yo' in black, in a black gown; dat's dat man dat controls dat fo'k of de road. But in hoodoo, there is little difference between devil and God."[79]

[77] Ibid., 100.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid., *1096.*

In hoodoo culture, the Devil became African Americans' source of empowerment. Yet what is generally absent from scholarship regarding the black cat bone is a direct understanding of the Devil and his role in the process. Authors have addressed the black cat bone, different cultural influences, and the bone's ritual and transformation. The bone's benefits such as luck, knowledge, and skills have also been presented. Yet while the Devil and the black cat bone were previously observed in binary terms, the black cat bone actually is the scholarly gateway to finding out exactly what type of power the Devil administered over people in the Black community.

Newbell Niles Puckett, for example, wrote about the origins of the bone. Puckett argued that "The black cat, is… an European Fetish animal, though his antiquity apparently dates back to Egyptian civilization ….the superstition about the bone is also among the Germans of Canada where contact with the Negroes has not taken place, thus mainly pointing to an European source."[80] Jeffery E. Anderson, in contrast, believes that the black cat bone is syncretic, with roots in both African and European civilization. In European culture, the black cat was seen as an unlucky creature, but in hoodoo and Voodoo, the black cat brings luck and success. In general, nineteenth century hoodoo was a combination of African, European, and Native American cultures in the South.[81] The black cat bone thus evolved into an Americanized version of magic stemming both from Europe and Africa. [82]

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[80]Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro, 256.* See also, "The Trick Bone of a Black Cat" *Journal of American Folklore* 12, (1899): 228-229.

[81]Jeffery E. Anderson, *Conjuring in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 2008) 25, 27.

Yvonne P. Chireau adds that with the development of hoodoo, African Americans used ingredients that were essential to conjuring and root work such as a rabbit's foot or the black cat bone.[83] Like John the Conqueror root, the bone offered solutions for people with multiple problems within the Black community. Used in conjunction with other animals and powders, the root would also make the work more effective.[84] Medicine bags or trick bags filled with extra helpings, both made the black cat bone process more complex and different. For example, African Americans used multiple charms to enable the black cat bone to do its job, such as the individual's needs. African Americans thus understood and believed that they would have positive outcomes with the bone. The perception of the black cat bone was similar to the Europeans' understanding of luck regarding the wishbone.

John the Conqueror Root was not the only ingredient infused with the black cat bone. Practitioners used steel dust, powders, or graveyard dust to make the black cat bone more effective. In New Orleans, people who practiced Voodoo used similar charms known as gris gris.[85] Conjure doctors considered Gris Gris an extra helping during rituals. In New Orleans, African Americans used Gris Gris to protect the people who wore them and to bring people luck, protection, and love. Similarly, Native Americans had medicine bags. Jeffrey Anderson claimed

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[82] Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjure Religion,* 45.

[83]Ibid.,11.

[84]Ibid., 45*;* see also, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Low country* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 124.

[85] According to Robert Tallant in *Voodoo in New Orleans,* "Thousands of Negroes carry Johnny the Conqueror roots, not only in New Orleans, but all over the country."27.

that medicine bags were a source of spiritual strength and of power in the healing arts. He wrote that a Sauk guide Wennebea spoke on the behalf of the medicine bags. He asserted that medicine bags were "indispensable to obtain success against our enemies."[86]

The enslaved populations grounded their beliefs in the black cat bone and John De Conqueror root. Daily struggles such as flogging and mutilation led enslaved people to the black cat bone. A former slave named Robert H. Burn explained that "De slaves would all try to git dem a black cat and cook him and when he done take the cooked cat to a stream of water and pour into stream and de bone dat would come to de top of de water and float for good luck to give him luck, keep moster from whipping him and many other things."[87] In this way, the black cat bone provided a defensive function. To some, it was their only option; the black cat bone could relieve them of the pain, if they followed a specific ritual or process. Once a slave, Henry Bibb discussed similar issues concerning flogging and the need for conjuring. Bibb wrote, "Many of them believe in what they call "conjuration," tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art, and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slave."[88] Bibb's beliefs indicate that although some enslaved people did not believe in hoodoo full-heartedly, they wanted the masters to believe that they did to bypass harsh punishments

[86] Jeffrey Anderson, *The Voodoo Encyclopedia: Magic, Ritual, and Religion* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 206.

[87] Robert H. Burns, WPA narratives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (slave was born in Tennessee, but moved to Florence, Alabama). "Story from Ex-Slave, 530 Mass. Street, 1937. Interviewed by J.S. Thomas.

[88] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York),1849.

African Americans who believed in conjuring considered it to be a serious investment in spirituality. Henry Clay Bruce, a former slave, suggested that superstition was some slaves' only option, which went to demonstrate their level of desperation during slavery. Bruce understood why slaves accepted this belief, as well as the rituals and remedies that were used. Lest he be tarred with the brush of superstition, however, he was careful to establish distance between himself and the practice by claiming that he and other people did not believe in hoodoo. He wrote, "In order to show that education and intelligence are the great powers which have been the means of dispelling the gloom of superstition and voodooism among the Colored people especially."[89] Because of the position that the slaves were currently in, they had no choice but to believe in magic. He added, "Superstition in some form has always existed, especially among illiterate people, regardless of color, and the more illiterate the greater the amount of superstition."[90] Bruce could have come to this conclusion because his life in slavery was humane, compared to others who received the opposite treatment.[91]

In the nineteenth century, one way African Americans exposed their beliefs was in the form of autobiographies or slave narratives. In the twentieth century, African Americans who were immersed in hoodoo culture and beliefs also expressed themselves through music. Music was another form of hoodoo folklore involving the black cat bone. African American artists sang

[89] Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man" Twenty-Nine Years a Slave, Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man* (York, Pennsylvania, Anstadt and Sons 1895), 52-59.

[90] Ibid., 52-59.

[91] According to Documenting the American South, Bruce, "spent twenty-nine years enduring what he considered a relatively humane form of slavery." http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/bruce/summary.html

about the black cat bone and its abilities. The songs not only expressed their personal beliefs, but it could have been a way to expose their listeners to different ways of handling their life situations.

Preserving folklore through music was also a way of spreading hoodoo culture beliefs. Many blues songs from the early twentieth century employed hoodoo motifs in their lyrics. References to hoodoo, conjuration, mojo, charms, goopher dust, magical roots, and the like were common in the songs of the period. One example was Bessie Brown's "Hoodoo Blues." Referring to a romantic rival, she sang:

> Goin' 'neath her window, gonna lay a black cat bone, Goin' 'neath her window, gonna lay a black cat bone, burn a candle on her picture; she won't let my good man alone.[92]

Brown's lyrics constitute a story about seeking revenge. Interestingly, revenge in this instance was not necessarily a negative action. Bessie is a woman fighting for her relationship who used the bone as a source of empowerment. The black cat bone thus enabled the practitioner to offer rituals and other "tricks" to their clients to accommodate the client's desires. People might have trouble dealing with infidelity issues in their relationships, but if they had access to the bone, it might fix their problems.

As late as 1928, in a song entitled "Shootin' Star Blues," New Orleans-born blues queen, Lizzie Miles, alluded to the obscure but grisly technique by which individuals could acquire an all-powerful black cat bone.

[92]Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjure Religion* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 145.

> I done crossed my fingers, counted up to twenty-three, I seen a star falling, that means bad luck done fell on me. A black cat bone's boiling, I put it one at half past twelve, Tie it in a sack, walk off talking to myself.[93]

What the song "Shootin' Star Blues" suggests is that even though Lizzie Miles experienced bad luck, that experience did not affect her situation involving the bone. Miles was well aware that the gone was powerful. The lyrics also indicated that she had knowledge concerning the ritual of the bone.

Zora Neale Hurston, from 1928 to 1932, traveled through the South to collect folklore and knowledge from the Black community. While there, Hurston participated in an initiation process. The latter goal was to establish leadership roles and relationships with believers. As a result, practitioners introduced Hurston to folk tales dealing with love, animals, God, and the Devil. Practitioners also immersed Hurston in a culture that believed in conjuring, root work, and the black cat bone.

Father Watson was one practitioner who Hurston encountered on her folkloric journey. During a ritual, Father Watson mentioned the black cat bone and the bone's ability to make someone invisible. Hurston later wrote that "Father Watson, he said to me, 'You will do well, but you need the black cat bone. Sometimes you have to be able to walk invisible, some things must be done in deep secret, so you have to walk out of the sight of men.'"[94] Some clients of practitioners had to either wear the bones around their necks or they would have to put the bone

[93]Ibid., 145.
[94]Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington, Indiana: The University of Indiana Press, 1935), 228.

in their pocket each time they wanted to become invisible. It is not clear whether Hurston did, but this ritual itself was different for Hurston.[95]

The black cat bone assisted people with invisibility, financial difficulties, and gambling success. Some people had financial issues or were just in need of quick cash, and so they believed the black cat bone would be the answer to their problems. In Algiers, Louisiana, a practitioner stated, "No fo' gamblin', it's a black cat yo' must git-a jet black cat, de only thing white on him shold be his teeth." In addition, one way to acquire wealth from gambling was through wearing the bone somewhere on a person's body. "Now, dat bone is de bone yo' must wear, an' there's no special place tuh wear it, but secure it in a place dat yo' won't misplace it. An' yo'll have all de luck in de world fo' gamblin'. Dat's all it is to the black cat."[96] Using the bone for gambling luck required a specific process or ritual.

The black cat bone process varied across the Gulf Coast, but regardless of location, everyone had to find the "blackest" cat. Another important step was that some practitioners preferred a male cat. To begin, a person had to boil the cat down until the skin and meat fell off the bone. After this stage, the rituals differed in certain regions. In New Orleans, after boiling the cat an individual gathered up all of the bones and a mirror, and traveled to a crossroads in the woods. While in the woods, the person had to "stand directly between the forks with your back to the straight road behind is reflected."[97] After that person boiled the cat, they also had to take the

[95]Ibid.

[96] Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Root Work-Witchcraft,* 87.

[97]Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro,*257. See also, Hyatt's *Hoodoo- Conjuration-root work-Witchcraft,* 77. See also, The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, 156.

bone and put it in their mouths. The mirror was essential because that person had to let each bone fall out of their mouths while looking into the mirror. As the person performed this step, he or she would know that they have the right bone because the mirror would become dark. In one variant, however, the person would become blind when finding the right bone. At that moment, they had mastered the ritual; they found the black cat bone.[98] Errors within the ritual process could affect the whole ritual; therefore a person had to be certain that this was something that they wanted to experience.

In Florida and Alabama, some clients had to take the bones to a stream. There, they put the bones into the water. The bone that went upstream was the one that the person needed in order for the process to work. The stream had to be running north so that the bone could go south. If the stream was running south, east or west, the ritual would be ineffective. For a special desire, a person would have to curse the day that they were born and go to the forks of the road in order to have complete control over their powers. Meeting at the fork of the road could be seen as symbolic in that it represented decisions made by the participant, but also a chance to meet the Devil.

The Devil and the black cat bone

Conjuring provided a way to understand how African Americans perceived the Devil. According to John W. Roberts, "On one level, the belief in conjuration reinforced the lesson inherent in trickster tales that trickery represented the most advantage within a hierarchical

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[98] Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration-root work-Witchcraft*, 86.

social-political system."[99] Practitioners and clients were definitely aware of this system. Roberts explains that the enslaved considered trickery as unsuitable in the community, regardless of intention. People within the Black community considered White antagonists, such as slave masters, as being the worst tricksters of all: people who manipulated and robbed others. Therefore, "enslaved Africans justified the conjurer's actions by virtue of their need to act as both protagonist and antagonist in order to protect the community."[100]

During slavery and emancipation, African Americans had different ways in which they viewed the Devil. Forcing Christian beliefs on the enslaved community was a difficult task, but those who accepted hoodoo beliefs began to construct/develop their own ideas about the Devil. For more than 200 years of slavery, some enslaved persons believed that the Devil was a much more powerful being than God. William Wells Brown wrote, "The influence of the Devil was far greater than that of the Lord. If one of these votaries had stolen a pig, and the fear of the Lord came over him, he would most likely ask the Lord to forgive him, but still cling to the pig. But if the fear of the Devil came upon him, in all probability he would drop the pig and take to his heels."[101] African Americans who accepted Christianity within the Black community began to fear both the Lord and the Devil, and some were more afraid of the Devil.

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[99] John Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 103.

[100] Ibid.

[101] William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home or The South and its people, (*Boston: A.G. Brown, 1880), 7-8.

Enslaved persons sometimes "sold their soul" to have power over their masters. Another reason that they sold their soul was to possess the skill of protection. Enslaved persons wanted to protect themselves from harsh and brutal treatments such as flogging. William Wells Brown recalled the story of Dinkie, an older slave who was involved in conjuring. Both black and white communities feared him. For example, he worked, ate, and drank on the plantation whenever he wanted. Dinkie's actions infuriated his new master, and the master wanted to prove himself to Dinkie by stating that he was going flog him.[102] Slave masters used flogging as a way to instill fear in the slave communities.

The news about the flogging incident circulated around the plantation. Another slave overheard a conversation that Dinkie had with the Devil. Dinkie allegedly stated, "Now, good and lovely Devil, for more than twenty years, I have served you faithfully. Before I got into your service, de White folks bout an' sold me an' my old wife an' chillen, an' whip me, and half starve me. Dey did treat me mighty bad, dat you knows."[103] Before he started to trust and serve the Devil, slavery continued to adversely affect his life. He mentioned the horrible experiences of what slaves typically endured which included whippings, separation of families, and starvation. Dinkie then proceeded to talk about something important to the understanding of God and the Devil. He points out that, "Den I use to pray to de Lord, but dat did no good, kase de White folks don't fear de Lord. But dey fears you an ever since I got into your service, I is able to do as I please." This statement highlights his personal understanding of the power that the Devil had

[102]Ibid.

[103]Ibid.

during slavery. To him, the Devil was more powerful because God was not feared among the White people; instead they feared the Devil. Dinkie's beliefs could translate to mean that in order to protect himself, as well as his family, he had to trust in the Devil instead of God; the Devil's power of fear was Dinkie's protection.

The Devil's protection was essential for survival on plantations. Dinkie understood the need for protection, and wanted to use it as a weapon against his master. Dinkie went on to state that, "no Whites dares lay his hand on me; and dis is all owing to de power dat you give me. Oh, good and lovely devil! Please continue dat power." Here Dinkie expressed his gratitude towards the Devil in order for the Devil to continue to empower him. He believed that the Devil was responsible for White people not being able to resort to violence.

Dinkie continued to show his loyalty to the Devil in order to receive protection. He stated, "but, dear devil, I axe you to stand by me in dis my trial hour, an' I will neber desert you as long as I live. Continue dis power; make me strong in your cause, make me to be more faithful to you, an' let me still be able to conquer my enemies, an' I will give 'you all de glory, and will try to deserve a seat at your right hand." [104] As previously stated, the forks of the road was symbolic of making a life decision; the selling of one's soul is a final decision that people made in order to master their skills. Dinkie sold his soul not for riches, but to protect himself from the horrors of slavery. Dinkie praised the Devil for bestowing such powers on him in his time of need, and he wanted the Devil to continue to do so, for the sake of survival. Dinkie

[104]Ibid.

acknowledged two supernatural beings: the Lord and Devil. He claims that the Lord is not feared by the Whites; it is the Devil who they fear. Dinkie recognized this type of power.

Characteristics of the Devil in the 1930s

Eventually, different names and understandings of the Devil emerged. During the 1930s and 1940s, The majority of African Americans in hoodoo culture described the Devil as "the rider" or the "Big Black Man." He opened roadways and bestowed talent, whether it was musical prowess, gambling success, or gold strikes.[105] The Devil was not an evil character in hoodoo culture. He was simply a source, another option for individuals to change and empower their lives. Crucially, African Americans often described the Devil as, or having similar characteristics to Papa Legba in Haitian Vodu religion and Voodoo religion in New Orleans. Papa Legba was a spirit who demanded worship and respect. The reason for this was because Papa Legba was the last spirit to communicate with in order to have one's desires fulfilled. People in hoodoo culture saw him as an intermediary, between the spiritual and secular world.

Some African Americans worshipped Papa Legba and the Devil in the Black community. In the twentieth century, the Haitian deities and ancient beings existed to assist individuals with their personal desires.[106] The roles and responsibilities of the Devil shifted to the black cat bone narratives. The Devil was a complicated character and his role was interpreted in many ways in

[105] Lilith Dorsey, *Voodoo and African American Paganism* (New York: Kensington Publishing, 2005), 71.

[106] Ibid. Similarly, an example of Papa Legba is demonstrated in Native American folk culture. In Native American or Indigenous culture, the Coyote was known to be a 'trickster," a man that has the power to go against the natural order of the world. This character is similar, but different from Papa Legba, and the Devil in hoodoo because the Coyote represents their ancestors instead of a deity or being.

the Black community. The Devil was either seen as a positive/evil being, or sometimes a trickster. The trickster can be translated to signify a being having knowledge and secrets and the ability to manipulate life situations.

Some African Americans saw the Devil as a powerful trickster who they feared in their communities. For example, one practitioner claimed, "Now, aint many people use black cat bones becuz dey don't wanta go through-see, you have to sell yorself to de devil. Any hoodooism is sold to de devil."[107] This statement points to two conclusions: people were genuinely frightened of being involved with the Devil, and the selling of one's soul. Some African Americans thought that if people sold their soul to the Devil, it meant that they were evil.

During the ritual, African Americans also thought of the Devil as a master controller, a being who could potentially own an individual. According to a practitioner, the black cat bone had the ability to transform a person into a "half-a- Devil." This practitioner states, "A fellah was born way back in slavery times. Well, yo' know, he's sittin' down talkin' to me an' so he tole me, once when he sold hisself to de devil. Say he went out an' got him a real black cat an' after he got dis real black cat, den he'd taken 'im an' he boiled 'im...an de' one dat went up de stream he got dat an' kept it in his pocket an' then he come tuh be whut chew call a half-a-Devil- yo' know, a witchcraft."[108] Becoming a half-a-devil indicates that this man would now possess a different type of power because he sold his soul. It seems as though this man was not frightened, and thus

[107] Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjuration- Root work- Witchcraft,* 88-89.

[108]Ibid., 75-76.

felt comfortable with the relationship between the black cat bone and the Devil. The reason for selling his soul is not stated, however, the challenges had to be important enough to seek the Devil for empowerment. In this case, becoming half-a-Devil was not seen as a terrible life change, but a simply a way to get what that person desired.

African Americans nonetheless feared selling their soul to the Devil because of the negative connotations attached to his characteristics. In the 1930s, they were cautious of the Devil or avoided him altogether. They believed that receiving that type of power was not worth selling a soul. However, African Americans overall interpreted "selling one's soul" differently from the people outside of hoodoo culture. Outsiders were typically people who were neither a part of nor believed in hoodoo. Outsiders interpreted "selling one's soul" to the Devil as physically giving him your soul in exchange for material goods. In hoodoo culture, "selling one's soul" was essentially seeking the Devil in exchange for knowledge and possession of a certain skill. Christian believers considered this ritual as that of an individual becoming evil, having evil intentions, and rejecting God, but this was not the case.

The black cat bone and the forks of the road

The black cat bone played an intricate role at the crossroads. Denise Alvarado claimed that, in many cultures dealing with folk magic, the location in which individuals go to perform rituals is at the crossroads. The crossroads symbolized the meeting between two worlds, the secular and spiritual, or "neither here nor there." The crossroads was also a place where individuals could conjure up spirits and tune into the supernatural realms. In hoodoo, this

location was prominent and well known for root work.[109] People in hoodoo culture saw the Black Man at the forks of the road, or the Devil, was seen as a god because he was considered the intermediator and had the power. The location is the meeting point between the spiritual world and the secular world, having power to deny or offer power. The selling of one's soul was non-negotiable and irrevocable. A person could not sell their soul, and then change their mind for any reason. Furthermore, if a person wanted to finish the black cat bone process, the fork of the road was the place. In New Orleans, a practitioner addressed this part of the process:

> "They claim that you go to the fork of the road fo' nine mornin straight. You walk backward. You curse the day you were born. You curse the sun, the moon. You curse God. Then they'll sell theirself to the Devil. The ninth mornin' they'll take a black cat to de fork of that road an' they'll t'row him doin in that water an' let him cook to pieces. An' then they'll take somepin, an' they'll fin' one of them bones; an they'll call that the black cat bone. An' they sell theirself to the Devil an' they be able to do all kin' of matter.[110]

The forks of the road were an intricate part of the black cat bone process because it was the final step. The Devil possessed a type of strength and ability that an individual would have the opportunity to also possess. The Devil was also capable of giving the person whatever they desired. For the most part, the individual would have to curse God, the moon, the sun, and the day they were born. The individual had to relinquish all of the past notions of life and everything that had possibly created them. The person understood God as a supernatural being who did not

[109] Denise Alvarado, *Voodoo Hoodoo Spellbook* (York Beach, Maine: Weiser, 2011), 255.

[110] Hyatt, *Hoodoo- conjuration- Root work- Witchcraft*, 82.

possess the same power as the Devil. By cursing God, a person authorized the Devil to work on one's behalf. The Devil had permission because that individual gave him access.[111]

The forks of the road essentially became a place of support. As one practitioner stated,

> Well, dat's if yo' want to sell yo'self to de devil an' do anything in de world. Have yo' on a boilin' pot of watah an' throw him into de watah until all de meat boils off his bones...But when you go tuh de fo'ks of de road-you jes' go tuh any fo'ks of de road at twelve o'clock at night an' de devil will be dere wit chew. An' anything dat chew start he'll back yo' up on it.[112]

By choosing to sell one's soul, the ultimate prize or result was having the Devil to support one's desires. A slave master might have had some control over their bodies, but a soul was something that a master could never have; it belonged to the enslaved forever.

Past scholarship on hoodoo and the usage of syncretism, does not fully examine or evaluate the capacity in which the Devil possessed power and control over people in the Black community. The Devil was the last step to complete the black cat bone ritual at the forks of the road. All power stemmed from the Devil, his ability to possess one's soul in exchange for skills and knowledge. White and Black notions about the Devil were somewhat different. In hoodoo the Devil was not evil; he was a trickster. Christians knew the Devil to be evil, and less than God. For hoodoo, in some instances African Americans valued the Devil more and actually sought after the Devil in times of uncertainty. The Devil had many names in hoodoo culture; some called him the 'Black Man at the forks of the Road," a "trickster, and "a lovely" Devil. All

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., 90.

of these names are examples of personal interpretations of the Devil during slavery and into the twentieth century. The Devil empowered people within the Black community, using hoodoo, and through the black cat bone. African Americans saw the black cat bone as a tool that would lead other African Americans to the Devil for assistance.

The Snake: Wisdom, Power, and Protection

African Americans during the early to mid-twentieth century envisioned snakes as powerful creatures that had the ability to alter lives in ways more positive than negative. Folklore highlighted the incredible characteristics of these creatures. The snake was a symbol of freedom, incarnation, knowledge, status, and resistance. African Americans told tales about snakes and their ability to live in a human body, in addition to their poisonous venom, which was enough to kill a person. In addition, between the World Wars, African Americans also described snakes that dwelled in their community, such as the graveyard snake and the rattlesnake. Both were common yet developed different responsibilities in this culture.

In the Gulf Coast and surrounding areas, there were key/major difference between the varieties of snakes. Some African Americans closely associated the graveyard snake with the Devil, as the graveyard was considered spiritual ground. Some African Americans believed that graveyard dirt was able to keep bad spirits away. In Jacksonville, Florida, a hoodoo informant stated, "Git chew some graveyard dirt an' put it aroun' yuh waist an' dat'll keep it [conjure] off."[113] If a person was conjured, or had roots put on them, the graveyard was the place to reverse the negative effects of magic. The graveyard was also a place that conjurers would go in order to place evil roots on someone, or conjure up something good. One southern man stated that, "hoodoo folks is might fond of eating snakes, case hit makes dem wise 'an cute; dey don't dar ter eat er grabeyard snake, case dey wud be eatin' de debbil hisself , an' he could't help em'

[113] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing,1970), 3127.

no more."[114] To some African Americans, a black snake always represented the Devil.[115] People were well aware of the snake's abilities regarding such knowledge. People who associated the snake with the Devil also feared that if they partook of eating the snake, the consequence would be meeting the Devil.

In the South, there were two powerful snakes that African Americans used during rituals. In the Gulf Coast region, one of the snakes was called the "King Snake." The name probably refers it being powerful, presiding over the graveyard. Also, the other snake was called the blacksnake. However, a practitioner stated that, "Yo' take a white man and he like a king snake, an' yo' take a nigger an' he like a blacksnake."[116] It is not clear whether the practitioner was implying that the name and the ability of the snake involved race or preference. However, the statement could suggest power and equality struggles between Blacks and Whites during that time. The "King Snake" could represent the white man and his status in society. The "blacksnake" could signify a black man who was seen as less than in society. Therefore, there were certain animals that only Blacks and Whites could use.

During the twentieth century, folklore researchers published their knowledge of snake beliefs in hoodoo culture. In 1927, Hilda Roberts published "Louisiana Superstitions," and she wrote about superstitions involving snakes. She states,

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[114]Newbell Puckett, *Folk beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina, 1925), 552.

[115] Ibid., 498;550-52.

[116]Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 705.

> About the snake two kinds of superstition seem to have centered, one treating it as harmful and the other as protective. According to the first, you will have bad luck if a snake crosses your path, or if you dream of snakes; but according to the second, if you wear a string of snake bones around your ankle, snakes will never bite you. This kind of superstition is general, and it seems to go back to the ancient hostility set forth in Genesis 3:1-5; but the latter kind is practiced by blacks only, and is especially interesting when compared with the serpent of brass set up as a cure for serpent bites, Numbers 21: 8-9.[117]

Roberts claimed to know about the positive effects of the snake which included protection. However, Roberts indicated that snakes also had negative implications that resulted in bad luck. Roberts then links this to the Bible. She basically shows the dual roles of the snake. The snake could be a creature spreading protection, or the snake could poison someone. She firmly states that African Americans only practiced snake beliefs. Roberts' statement suggests that not even White Americans practiced this belief.

African Americans' perception of snakes and their traits changed and developed over time. Depending on the location, snakes were worshipped, but at the same time feared throughout the community. Multiple stories emerged regarding snakes that were in conflict with Christian's concepts regarding the function of this creature. Christianity was responsible for the role fo the snake changing. A southern man stated, "when the Devil in the form of a serpent succeeded in tempting Adam and Eve he laughed until he split himself, the spirit part of him goes about tempting and helping out hoodoos, but the material part lives in the graveyard."[118] Also, the spirit part could suggest that it was given to hoodoos as a source of power and wisdom.

[117] Hilda Roberts, "Louisiana Superstitions." *Journal of American Folklore* 40 no.156 (1927):144-208. http://www.jstor.org/stable/534893. Accessed December 1, 2015.

[118] Newbell Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 230.

The material part possibly represented the skin and other parts of the snake that conjurers used in rituals.

Christians believed that the serpent notably was responsible for Adam and Eve's fate in the Garden of Eden. It was the serpent who forced Eve to convince her husband to indulge in the tree of knowledge. This story suggests two different perspectives concerning knowledge. The Devil was responsible for deceiving and tempting of Adam and Eve. Therefore, the snake was the pure representation of the Devil. But in hoodoo culture, snakes and the Devil both represent, for the most part, a positive role regarding knowledge. It was snake knowledge that the ancestors passed on to generations. The snake represented knowledge, but to others, the snake was a deadly animal.

The rattlesnake was known to be venomous, killing people who were infected. However, in hoodoo culture, multiple practitioners used rattlesnake skin and powder to conjure their enemies. The snakes had negative connotations, but at the same time, both were needed to uplift the Black community. The beliefs concerning snakes were able to help African Americans maintain their sense of culture. It was essential that snakes protected them during their personal struggles and journeys. Moreover, a full explanation surrounding the Devil's involvement is missing. The Devil was able to continue to represent these creatures and at the same time have a powerful stance within the Black community. In the following pages, snakes will be examined through the lens of hoodoo culture.

Snake knowledge in hoodoo culture often included stories of people's experiences. Recent historians such as Rod Davis, Maya Deren, and Elizabeth J. West provide information

about the Black community dealing with snakes, power and the Devils' influence.[119] Maya Deren claimed that the snake was a follower of the Devil, and thus the Devil having power.[120] The snake did not represent evil; it was just a follower of a being that African Americans and others deemed powerful. West adds to this narrative by claiming that the snake's influence with the ancestors proved that snakes did not represent evil. The snake actually had a positive connotation in African tradition. [121]

African Americans worked diligently to preserve their culture; it was a way to reconnect to their ancestors and homeland. Allen Dwight Callahan and Jeffrey Anderson meanwhile both had similar perspectives regarding African ancestors and their connections with snakes. Callahan stated that power includes appreciation of the ancestors.[122] Anderson wrote that "the prevalence of snakes was a powerful force in preserving African serpent gods."[123] He added that depending on the setting, African Americans both feared and worshipped the snake. African Americans felt as though the snake was indeed powerful, but whether a person worshipped or

[119] Rod Davis, *American Vodou: Journey into a Hidden World* (Denton, Texas: The University of North Texas Press, 1999), 37-38.

[120]Yvonne Chireau talks about a Georgia man who was an ex slave who knew about the Devil and the snake. He stated that, "the Devil was incarnated in the form of a snake, archetypal symbol for evil in the biblical tradition." *Black Magic,* 106.

[121]Elizabeth J. West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visons of Memory* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 153.

[122] Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible (*New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008), 90-92.

[123] Jeffery E. Anderson, *Conjuring in African American Society* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 2008), 66.

feared the snake depended on that person's personal belief system. Either way, it was a way to reconnect to their ancestors and homeland.

Melville Jean Herskovitz argued that African Americans believed in serpent worship. In 1941, Herskovitz argued that, "Negro beliefs concerning snakes obviously had carry-overs of African religious concepts salvaged in the face of the adoption of Christianity."[124] This type of ancestor worship was seen in hoodoo tradition. Scholars have addressed the origins of the snake, how it is perceived in hoodoo tradition, and how powerful the creature was because of the Devil.[125]

Early Colonial Period

Africans who associated themselves around religious deities believed in the Serpent God, Damballa of Dahomey. According to Raboteau, "In Dahomey the god Damballa (Da) was envisioned as snake and as a rainbow, principle of fluidity and governor over men's destinies."[126] Having control over men's destinies made the snake powerful and highly respected. Men who traveled to Haiti spoke about Damballa as being a "Serpent Father." In the nineteenth century, an observer named Moreau de Saint Mery stated that the snake was the most powerful creature and was deemed responsible for controlling certain events around the world. The snake also

[124]Melville Jean Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1990), 239.

[125] Elizabeth J. West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visons of Memory* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 153.

[126] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 75.

possessed the knowledge of the past present. [127] Moreau de Saint Mery's argument implies that in his world view, snakes were known as powerful ancient creatures that influenced many people.

During the early U.S. republic, rattlesnakes represented unity, racial fear, and national identity. White settlers and explorers were well aware of the serpent's roe in the Garden of Eden. However, these men became fascinated with the rattlesnake's abilities and how snakes symbolized power. Most of White settlers and explorers' conceptions stemmed from the Native American belief system. Zachary Hutchins argues that "critics have often occluded the ways in which White writers appropriated Native American beliefs regarding the rattlesnake into their understanding of the nation as a nascent paradise. The rattlesnake was made into a symbol of white colonial unity and the Edenic nation state."[128] The snake not only represented colonial rule against British control but anyone who went against the policies of the Americans. The rattlesnake remained a symbol throughout the nineteenth century and influenced people in power.

In the late 1700s, popular figures such as Benjamin Franklin used the rattlesnake as a symbol for the colonies in America. Franklin believed that people who entered the colonies due to criminal transportation represented the serpent that tore apart the union. The union that Franklin was referring to was the union that Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden. As a

[127]Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804:A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford, Saint Martin, 2006), 59.

[128] Zachary Hutchins, "Inventing Eden: Primitivism, Millennialism, and the Making of New England," *The American Historical Review 4* 120 (2015):680 doi:10.1093/ahr/120.4.1473. Accessed January 29, 2016.

result, Franklin adopted the snake for the colonies' benefit. Hutchins points out that, "Franklin returned to the image of the rattlesnake in a woodcut widely recognized as the first political cartoon published in America."[129]

White Americans also associated the power of rattlesnakes with African Americans, slave culture, and African origins. White citizens of the early republic believed that African American slaves retained a special relationship with the snakes.[130] Hutchins points out that "their association with snakes even seemed to endow African Americans, whose fascinating smiles were more penetrating through an ebony complexion than under an alabaster forehead, with some power and allure attributed to rattlesnakes and other serpents."[131] Yet in the early colonial period, colonists and citizens were both skeptical and worried about the real power of the rattlesnake. Being skeptical of the power did not disallow Africans Americans from believing and accepting snake's role in their communities.

In order for hoodoo beliefs to transfer well in Black communities, African Americans used biblical stories. For example, the syncretic link between Christianity and hoodoo demonstrates that Christian concepts were different, yet useful. In Christianity, Moses was the man to whom God bestowed the Ten Commandments, and the man who freed the Israelites from the Pharaoh in Egypt. To Zora Neale Hurston, Moses was one of the greatest hoodoo

[129] Ibid.

[130]Ibid.

[131]Ibid.

practitioners. Within the tradition, the "great father of magic," Moses was able to turn his rod into a snake while in the Pharaoh's court. Hurston stated,

> So Moses passed on beyond Jethro his rod. He lifted it up and tore a nation out of Pharaoh's side, and Pharaoh couldn't help himself. Moses talked with snake that lives in a hole right under God's foot-rest. Moses had fire in his head and a cloud in his mouth. The snake had told him God's making words.[132]

African Americans knew from the Bible that Moses was able to part the Red Sea with his rod. The parting of the Red Sea caused Moses to be seen the symbol of the Serpent God. African Americans believers in hoodoo further believed that Moses learned how to be a conjurer by way of his wife's father, Jethro. Hurston claims that "Jethro was a great hoodoo man." While Hurston conducted research on Voodoo in Haiti and Jamaica, she found people who believed that "Damballah, the deity in Haiti, is acknowledged as Moses, whose avatar is the serpent."[133] In Louisiana, she noticed that Moses still represented power.

African Americans often made parallels between experience and oral tradition. For example, some ethnic groups believed that people within their communities possessed the same power as Moses because they worshipped Damballah. Hurston wrote that because of Moses, there were countless pharaohs who used rods as a sign of power. Although she did not specify

[132] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington, Indiana: The University of Indiana Press, 1935), 194.

[133] Jermaine O. Archer, *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa (*United Kingdom: Routledge, 2008), 47.

which pharaohs used the rods, the point is that the snake's role was evident and remained a symbol of power and freedom.[134]

On Zora Neale Hurston's folkloric journey, conjurers exposed Hurston to the roles of snakes and protection. People shared their stories about the origins of protection and the power of the snake. One of the stories involved a snake complaining to God and how it needed protection in order to survive. For example, God put the snake in the bushes and on the ground. The snake was unhappy with his role and wanted to change the situation. One day the snake supposedly went to heaven to talk to God about protection. The snake said, "God, you put me down there on my belly in the dust and everything trots upon me and kills off my generations. Ah ain't got no kind of protection at all." God then decided to give the snake some form of protection such as poison. God states, " here, take dis poison and put it in yo' mouf and when they trumps on you, protect yo'self."[135]

The story then transitions into another creature complaining about snakes misusing their power of protection. In his defense, the snake claims that although God gave him the poison, he still did not have any "class to fight wid." Therefore, God thinks about it and decided to give him a bell. "Well, snake, I don't want yo' generations all stomped out and I don't want you killin' everything else dat moves. Here take dis bell and tie it to yo' tail. When you hear feels comin' you ring yo' bell and if it's yo friend, he'll be keerful. If it's yo enemy, it's you and him."[136]

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Zora Neale, *Mules and Men (*Bloomington, Indiana: The University of Indiana Press, 1935), 106.

Hurston's exposure to this narrative reinforces multiple concepts such as power, protection, and skill. By exposing the origins of empowerment it reveals the possible power struggle between God and the Devil, and how the Devil, through the snake, used the skills for protection. African Americans knew that having a snake could possibly develop a skill to manipulate situations.

Snake Wisdom

Harriet Tubman experienced "snake wisdom" that allowed her to maneuver throughout the South in search of freedom. Enslaved peoples in the South knew about Tubman and her method of freeing the slaves. In fact, the slaves were thrilled but also curious about Tubman's strategies and skills. Tubman's work ethic gained the attention of John Brown, the anti-slavery advocate who was interested in having Tubman as his advisor because he wanted to create a state for freed slaves. During this time, Tubman supposedly had a dream involving snakes that was symbolic.

> She thought she was in 'a wilderness sort of place all full of rocks, and bushes,' when she saw a serpent raise its head of an old man with a long white beard, gazing at her, 'wishful like, jes as ef he war gwine to speak to me, and then two other heads rose up beside him, younger than he- and as she stood looking at them, and wondering what they could want with her, a great crowd of men rushed in and struck down the younger heads, and then the head of the old man, still looking at her so wishful.[137]

Tubman, the story goes, did not understand the dream at first, until the seizure of Harpers Ferry. Jermaine Archer points out that "the two younger heads of the serpent that were struck down by the great crowd represented the fall of Brown's sons at the hands of Lee and his men.

[137] Jermaine O. Archer, *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2008), 49.

The elder head symbolized Brown who would be ultimately tried and hanged."[138] Tubman's "snake wisdom" did not end there. Tubman was fully aware of Moses and his ability to turn his rods into snakes while freeing Egyptian slaves. Tubman also thought of herself as having done something similar regarding the "Underground Railroad."

African American folklore preserved multiple stories surrounding the snake's role. Bloom argued that the snake was the subject of veneration, fear, and folklore. Its skin was used in the manufacture of charms, and talismans, while its presence was considered an omen.[139] Bloom's argument is an example of how folklore transformed into more than just a belief. African Americans transformed stories into physical charms. Also, the snake was considered an omen because of its historical significance with power.

Some African Americans in the twentieth century, however, believed that only practitioners had access to the snake's protection and power.[140] African Americans believed in snake power because to become a powerful conjurer, one must have permission from the ancient creature. An Alabama man mentioned that if a person wanted to become a conjurer that person would have to let snakes and other animals crawl on them without getting scared. If that person does not become afraid, then they become a conjurer.[141] The snake's spirit then would be of assistance to those wanting to have power to fix their lives.

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[138]Ibid.

[139] Harold Bloom, *Enslavement and Emancipation* (New York, New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2010), 70.

[140] Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Anniversary edition; Champaign, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 2009), 146.

[141] Newbell Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 222.

Not everyone had positive experiences with snakes. Some people had to seek out professional help. Some people did not know how to handle certain situations regarding snakes. For example, there were instances where people claimed that they had major problems dealing with snakes living inside of them. These problems brought on the possibility of someone conjuring that person. Practitioners had the power to invoke the spirit. People who were interested in becoming a conjurer had to get permission from the Snake God first. [142]

A Mississippi woman told a similar story about her issues with snakes and how a "regular" doctor could not help her. The conjurer needed to have experience with snakes in order to get rid of them. Instead, the conjurer was able to help her with milk.[143] Puckett explained that "taking a little fresh sweet milk in a pan, she had the woman lie down flat on her stomach with her mouth over the pan of milk. Very soon, a small snake about the size of a pencil came creeping out of her mouth and crawled into the milk."[144] Puckett also explains that the conjure doctor, who was a woman, was able to take the snake and put it in a vial. The conjure doctor supposedly expressed that she would be the only person that could handle the snake. Handling the snake proved that conjure doctors were able to gain power over the snake.

Clients witnessed the power of snakes through practitioners. For example, Harry Middleton Hyatt interviewed a person who explained that he or she knew of a lady named Miss

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[142] Ibid.,146.

[143] Newbell Pucket, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 253- 254.

[144] Ibid., 254.

Young who could help people who wanted to get rid of someone. The informant stated, "Say she sit you down and have a long snake…See the snake talk like a human, and she say [to the snake], "what he ask you, you tell it to him."[145] Hyatt then became interested in the snake that was present along with Miss Young. Hyatt wanted to know whether the snake really talked and how big the snake was at that time. Hyatt then stated, "Ventriloquism, I doubt it. The snake talks into Miss Young's ear and she repeats what the snake says to her."[146] The clientele who witnessed the practitioner engaging with the snake, played a role in people's belief in hoodoo and the practitioner's abilities.

Snakes and Conjure Doctors

The Black community played a major role in the legitimation, power, and status of a conjure doctor. A conjure doctor received legitimation and supported from his clients. It was the black public that in great part determined the limits and direction of change in conjure. For example, clients would abandon a practitioner who blatantly violated the accepted system, although it was a system that appeared open to change and individual variation.[147] Not only did their master handling snakes to become conjurers, but receiving clients was confirmation that they had power from the snake. If a client could not trust one's advice, they would eventually try another solution. The solution could be from another practitioner or simply self-help. For

[145] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing,1970), 67.

[146] Ibid., 67.

[147] Mechal Sobel, *Painting a Hidden Life: The Art of Bill Traylor* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 2009),68.

example, Anderson mentioned that, throughout the years, conjuring evolved and as a result, it became commercialized. He added, "There is also an increasing popularity in self-help books of magic and do it-yourself hoodoo manuals, which teach various spells and charms, as well as dream books that are used to help pick winning lottery numbers."[148]

African Americans used the rattlesnake and John the Conquer Root together to prevent harm. A practitioner in Mobile, Alabama stated,

> Do you know what rattlesnake marster is? Well, you get a small piece of that and a small piece of John de Conker root-de High John de Conker root and a new dime and a piece of lodestone, and yo' sew dis into a little bag called a toby. Sew it up and yo' kin either put a piece of red flannel or shammy skin-sew that up in it and keep it into yore left pocket always and never let anyone touch it. If you do that, that is a wonderful thing.[149]

Goopher dust is synonymous with graveyard dust and was frequently used in the Black community. Goopher dust is basically snake powder that African Americans used to assist them in their rituals. A practitioner stated that,

> Goofer dust is made up out of-lawd, lemme tell you somepin-goofer dust- tjeu sau now- this old man what I was telling you about they got at the station house [who] disappears. He says he gets a black snake before it mate-ketch him long bout in March, jes' long about March. Hang him upsides down [tail up, head down] and cut his throat and let his blood drip and have his blood drip into a jar. They take that blood and you kin mix it with whiskey if you wanta, and put that back in a dark corner. Take this snake and let him dry up and after he dry up, you grind that black snake and let him dry up and after he dry up, you grind that blacksnake-the whole skin and all, and make a powder. Well, that's what the root doctors call goofer dust."[150]

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[148] Jeffrey Anderson, *The Voodoo Encyclopedia: Magic, Ritual, and Religion* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 174.

[149] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 469.

[150] Ibid.,293.

The practitioner explained that the blood they obtained from the snake could also be used to harm someone else, adding, “Well that blood they got, if there anybody you got anything against them and dey come in or go anywhere, they just take about a tablespoonful of that and put it in whiskey-put it in a pint of whiskey.”[151] Goopher dust mixed with snake parts would provide the ultimate protection for that individual.

Some practitioners also believed that Goopher dust was able to alter thoughts of those exposed to Goopher dust. In Jacksonville, Florida, a practitioner described that the ways in which the dust was powerful. The practitioner stated, "All right, den. Now ah want show you. Now yo’ take but that graveyard dust and carry dat and throw it down all by yo’ [his] doorsteps where he gotta come in at. And suh, if he come in dere, ah pray to die- jes’ as soon as he walk up dere his mind will change. Ah don’t kere if somebody son [God’s son?] in dere."[152] The practitioner made it clear that the black snake indeed had power to change what the person was thinking. What is also interesting is that the practitioner stated that, “Ah don’t kere if somebody son.” It is possible that Hyatt wanted to reveal that the practitioner was referring to the power of God not being able to change their mind, but it seems more likely that the person was inquiring about the “dust.” In some cases, African Americans used Goopher dust to heal themselves as well as harm others.

African Americans associated Goopher dust with jinxing and getting rid of enemies. However, they used snake oil for the opposite effect. An interviewee in Alabama essentially

[151] Ibid.

[152] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing,1970), 705.

stated that he had issues with a person “tricking him.” Tricking could have meant that a person put a root or jinxed him at some point. He claimed that, “it feeled like pins and needles was sticking in de palms of mah foot an ah jest had to go down to de floor and stay where ah was without moving dat time, pricked me all ovah.”[153] In order to find out what was happening to his body, he asked dozens of people what the pain meant. He received unanimous feedback indicating that he had been "hurt." In hoodoo culture, hurt could be synonymous with "jinxing," "mojo," or "tricking." As a result, the interviewee went to New York to have a fortune teller tell him exactly what was wrong. The fortune teller stated that, "You’ve been hurt and the best thing you kin do is to get somebody to work on you-tuh [work on] de person dat tricked- de mam dat's been working on you."[154] After receiving the instructions from the fortune teller, he began the healing process. The healing process involved snake oil. He then states, "Den dis person made a salve, it as fer me. They made it with snake oil- ah mean, you know, de snake's liver. [155] The snake oil mixed with other charms for the healing to take place. He claimed that after a while, he was able to walk. However, every once and a while his foot would turn black as if he was bitten.

In the 1930s, African Americans used blacksnake roots for protection.[156] Practitioners and believers not only worshipped the snake, but they used the physical body as resources for protection. For example, a southern man claimed that "An' dere's a root deu call de blacksnake

[153] Ibid.,376.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

[156] The Blacksnake root was also known as Black Cohosh (Actaea racemose/Cimicifuga). See also, Jeffrey Anderson’s *Conjure in African American Society,* 71.

root. Yo' kin carry dat in your pocket an' dere cant anything harm yo'."[157] Another man claimed that in order to have power over an enemy, a person must find the "rattle snake master" or the blacksnake root. Once this person locates the blacksnake root, he or she must tie the root, preferably in six knots. After this portion of the ritual, the person had the choice of either wearing the root around them, or carrying the root in their pocket book. The person who finishes the task now has the power to tie their enemy up.[158]

Hyatt argued that the blacksnake root ritual was successful depending on that person's intentions/situation. For example, Hyatt wrote that the two examples of the root being used for protection were not the only ways that African Americans used it. He stated, "here it is a crippling poison, which reminds us that again that everything depends upon intention."[159] Hyatt was referring to a practitioner experiencing trauma with the blacksnake root. A practitioner explained that the blacksnake root was responsible for "fixing" a family member. The practitioner stated, "My mother's sister was fixed like that. This guy went out in de woods and he got some blacksnake root, and he went and killed a rattlesnake and he got some blood off it and he cut de rattlesnake's head."[160] In addition, the practitioner mentioned that the man buried the snake's head under the doorstep. The snake's head was able to fix the practitioner's aunt by "fastening" her foot in her back. Because of the snake head, she supposedly continued to walk in

[157] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing,1970), 418.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft*, 419.

[160] Ibid.

that position with crutches. The practitioner also claimed that the snake head would have affected anyone who walked right over the burial. However, Hyatt claimed that this belief did not correlate well with other sources, stating that if the snake was not put there for that specific person, it would not affect them.[161] This description of the blacksnake root is a great example of a person's intention with using such charms. The usage of the charm could result in negative as well as positive results.

In Jacksonville, Florida, a practitioner expressed that snakeskin was also useful during rituals.[162] The practitioner stated that, "A root doctor tole me dat if anybody was trying to harm you in any way- like telling de police to come to yo house and different things or you in some kind of business- you could go in de woods and ketch a black snake."[163] The practitioner explains that a person must catch the snake and skin it alive. After that person finishes that part of the ritual, they have to take the wet skin and tie it in a "bowknot." The next step for that person is to take the wet skin and put it under their pillow. For example, he or she claims that, "Even when you change beds let it stay right in the same spot-let it stay there no matter how stinking it gits, let it stay dere. De law would even come at yo' doorstep but he never would wanta come in."[164] The root doctor's method was similar to the process involving the snakeroot.

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[161] Ibid.

[162] African Americans during the nineteenth century thus used snakeskin for protection. In his account of the feared conjurer Dinkie, William Wells Brown wrote, "it was literally true, this man was his own master. He wore snake's skin around his neck, carried a petrified frog in one pocket, and a dried lizard in the other."[162] Brown's account not only proved that snakeskin was something that slaves used for protection, but that he believed that this remedy worked. Dinkie was a true example of conjuring.

[163] Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo- Conjuration- Root Work- Witchcraft: Beliefs accepted by Many Negroes and White People* (New York: Western Publishing, 1970), 598.

[164] Ibid.

Tying the skin in a knot could possibly suggest that the skin would be aggressively stronger. It is also possible that the knot resembled chains, which symbolized jail or bondage. The root doctor could have suggested snakeskin not only for protection but as a metaphor. African Americans were well aware of the symbolic remedies.[165]

African Americans in Florida believed in the power of rattlesnake belts. In St. Petersburg, a practitioner believed that the rattlesnake belts prevented people from being harmed. The practitioner stated, "Yo' kin kill a rattlesnake an' kill him an' take de three buttons off him an' after dey corner de rattlesnake, yo know."[166] After the person obtains the buttons, they must sew the buttons together in order to create a belt. If the person succeeds at this, they will not be harmed. What they received as a result was protection.[167]

African Americans held on to their beliefs about the snake and its abilities to assist the community. The need to feel powerful drove them to stay grounded in their beliefs. They wanted to believe and practice what their ancestors taught them. African Americans throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries believed that the Devil provided knowledge and strength. Some people used the snake to protect themselves against enemies, and slave masters who wanted to do them harm. As a result, the herbal remedies involving the snake was formed into a tradition during the 1930s and 40s.

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[165]Ibid.

[166]Ibid., 469.

[167] Ibid.

Although beliefs changed and evolved depending on location, some African Americans still viewed the Devil not as a negative being, but a positive one. The Devil was a being that some African Americans feared, trusted, and respected. The reason that the snake was viewed in a negative way was because of religion. People who were involved with Christianity believed that the snake was evil because of their interpretation of the Garden of Eden. African Americans who were comfortable with the Christian doctrine accepted this belief, but those who believed otherwise accepted that the snake was all-powerful and positive.

The concept of the Devil in the Black community was able to offer African Americans an opportunity to free themselves. African Americans were able to free themselves from financial instability, flogging, incarceration, and against vengeance. This concept also offered African Americans the chance at love, success, and invisibility. All of these factors played a role in how African Americans maintained their spirituality. Their spirituality was able to have a strong connection to folklore and magical practices. With this, enslaved Africans and later African Americans were able to have a sense of hope, empowerment, and protection.

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