HOODOO HERITAGE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION

by

MEGAN LANE

(Under the Direction of Sandy Dwayne Martin)

ABSTRACT

This paper will serve as a largely historical examination of the practice and history of American folk religion, in particular that of Hoodoo Conjure. It will be, in many ways, a reflection of the existing study of the practice, while seeking to establish the importance of folk religion in American as well as world culture. Folk religions are perhaps those that exist in every culture, thus this paper will provide a description of the American incarnation of one. The religious and cultural background of Hoodoo Conjure will be described, as well as its practice during the colonial and antebellum periods of the United States to the present day.

INDEX WORDS: Hoodoo, Conjure, Slavery, Folk Religion, Cunning Folk, Root Work, Charms, Magic

HOODOO HERITAGE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION

by

MEGAN LANE

B.A. Appalachian State University, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2008

HOODOO HERITAGE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION

by

MEGAN LANE

Major Professor: Sandy Dwayne Martin

Committee: Carolyn Jones Medine

Jace Weaver

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia

May 2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Sandy Martin for his guidance and insight and for always expecting my best. I also thank the other members of my committee for their participation in my academic endeavors, my colleagues for their encouragement and the authors whose books inspired me to explore this particular tradition.

And lastly, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering love and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of American folk religion, in particular that of what is known as Hoodoo Conjure in the United States, is one often influenced by pre- conception and misunderstanding. The stigma associated with folk religion and methods of conjure are so prevalent in western society that people almost always associate them with "superstition" and "evil." It is common place to identify folk religion along the lines of superstition, but to do so is to ignore the multi- faceted nature of religion in general; in the words of Gustav Jahoda, "one man's religion is another man's superstition."[1] In fact, it can also be said that the label "superstition" is typically stamped upon traditions that function differently than those of supposed mainstream ones; in ancient Rome, Christianity was viewed as the "superstitious cult" of Christ.[2] In order to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of American folk religious traditions like Hoodoo Conjure, it is important to let go of their often judgmental definitions as "primal" and "superstitious."

This particular paper will seek to provide a largely historical examination of the practice of Hoodoo Conjure in America, including descriptions of its roots in Africa and Europe as well as elements of Native American traditions that have come together into a comprehensive whole over the history of the United States. The study of Hoodoo

---

[1] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness: Afro American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1977), 55.

[2] Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases* (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 2006), 27.

Conjure has in recent years served to shed light upon the living practice of American folk religion and its place in the spectrum of American religion in general. Due to the fact that the modern study of religious traditions like Hoodoo Conjure is many ways difficult, because of the lack of documentation concerning the subject, this paper will be in many ways a reflection of the overarching method of study of Hoodoo Conjure through historical and cultural perspectives. The organizational structure falls along traditional lines as well; describing the African roots of the practice, its transformation in the New World and its role within society.

This paper will, however also seek to extend the understanding of Hoodoo Conjure as an example of both an American religious tradition, a tradition that serves to represent the possibility that a religion may perpetuated itself through culture and history rather than scripture and doctrine and an example of what I would call the overarching world religious tradition that is folk religion. For the purpose of this paper, *folk religion* is defined as "a system of beliefs, practices and rituals that are passed from generation to generation through a common culture."[3] Folk religion and *folk religious traditions* will be used as "blanket descriptions" to refer to the practices and religious rituals of the peoples of Africa, Europe and America. The term "Conjure" is often used interchangeably with "Hoodoo," therefore I will utilize the term "Hoodoo Conjure" for purposes of clarity. Often Hoodoo Conjure is cited as the purely malevolent side of conjuration- the casting of evil hexes upon "good" people by the "bad"; however a more inclusive understanding of the term would be the uniquely American practice of "practicing magic or witchcraft, to cast spells, and cause "good" or "bad" luck for

---

[3]Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Introduction to Folk religion,* http://www.missiology.org/folkreligion/introduction.htm

someone through spiritual means."[4] Hoodoo Conjure is as multi-faceted as any other religious practice.

Hoodoo vs. "Voodoo" and Popular Opinion

In understanding Hoodoo Conjure it is vital to differentiate it from "Voodoo," a term that is an American corruption of the word "Vodou" which identifies a traditional West African religion.[5] Hoodoo Conjure is distinct from Vodou in that it is a religious system of beliefs that manifests itself in the manipulation of spiritual forces to do one's bidding, both malevolent and benevolent, in the physical world. Vodou, on the other hand, is a religion that worships a superior Creator God, as well pantheon of deities through veneration and respect, as many of the "established" world religions do. It is usually the stigmatized conception of "evil Hoodoo " that people are referring to when they identify "Voodoo"; Hoodoo Conjure, in reality, is an intricate system of magic, herbalism, divination and witchcraft that often erroneously dismissed as simple "sorcery" and "fortune telling."[6] This misunderstanding of Hoodoo Conjure in the United States has been facilitated, and in most cases even caused by, the portrayal of African religious traditions in the media.

The modern conception of Voodoo is one facilitated by pop culture, in particular the influence of nearly one hundred years of American film. The average American's knowledge of the Vodou religion is restricted to the notion of witch doctors, zombies, and of course, the "Voodoo doll." The idea of the "zombie" was introduced to Americans

[4] Ina Johanna Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 43.

[5] There are many different spellings used to identify this religion (Vodu, Vodun, Voudou, etc.) I have chosen "Vodou" in its essentially Haitian form, in order to differentiate between the religion and its deities, called Vodun.

[6] Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 233.

by an author named William Saebrook, whose book *The Magic Island*, written in 1929, introduced the general public to Haitian Vodou.[7] Once American film makers came across the often- held idea in Vodou (in particular its Haitian incarnation) that it would be possible to re animate a dead body through witchcraft (namely "Zombie Poison") and use it to carry out one"s dealings on Earth, they fully exploited it to provide entertainment in the form of horror films. Movies that range from 1932"s *White Zombie* and 1941"s *I Walked with a Zombie* to 1984"s *Thriller* and 2005"s *The Skeleton Key*, only serve to exploit the instances of the use of black magic in conjure culture, making it seem as though Hoodoo Conjure was only a blasphemous collection of curses, sorcery and human sacrifice.[8] In fact, at the beginning of Michael Jackson's very famous *Thriller* video, there is a disclaimer in which he denies any association with "the occult."

While it is important to recognize that Hoodoo Conjure is not an essentially evil practice, one must also refrain from understanding it as a system of pure benevolence and "good magic."[9] Hoodoo Conjure may be used for both helping and harming, as spiritual energy is seen as neutral; the ways in which conjure was manifested is wholly dependant upon the nature and personality of the practitioner. The importance of Hoodoo Conjure lies not in identifying its practice as "good" or "bad," but in identifying it as a rare occasion of the coming together of many similar practices of people of

---

[7] *Voodoo in the United States,* http://studentweb.tulane.edu/~lzee/novoodoo.htm.

[8] *Voodoo in the United States,* http://studentweb.tulane.edu/~lzee/novoodoo.htm.
It was, in fact, upon watching The Skeleton Key as an undergraduate that I was motivated to explore the practice of Hoodoo in America further. I found it appalling that even in the year 2005 film makers were still using the traditions and practices of African Americans as fodder for horror films; Hoodooists in this film are reduced to representing ghostly "body snatchers."

[9] Hoodoo Conjure is often identified under headings concerning the "black arts" in textual sources; I would suggest using the term "gray arts" as Hoodoo Conjure utilizes both black and white magic.

different races and ethnicities into an overarching religious practice in America.[10] While it would seem somewhat confusing to refer to a *religious system* or set of beliefs without identifying an established, concrete *religion* that they serve to facilitate, Hoodoo Conjure in many ways reflects the modern concept of spirituality in the United States. Often people will identify themselves as "spiritual," or believing in a trans-empirical, super worldly power, without identifying an overarching religious dogma or classification that they adhere to. Hoodoo Conjure serves as an example of the ability of retaining spiritual beliefs and practices in a land separate from the one in which they originated.

While there has been a great deal of attention paid to the interaction between Caucasians and African Americans, as well as the relationships between African Americans and Native Americans, the elements of Hoodoo Conjure provide an instance of interaction between all of the races in early America. Beliefs and traditions of those of African, Native and European descent are often analogous and astonishingly similar, in spite of relative lack of interaction between these peoples before the colonization of the New World; these traditions interacted and developed upon the cohabitation of the peoples of the world in the American colonies and continue to the present day. The African traditions of herbal conjure in Vodou, through persecution and the oppression of slavery, as well as racial interaction and exchange, adopted certain Native American and European elements to survive in the United States and developed into what is known as Hoodoo Conjure today.

For example, many Vodouists in America consider the arrowheads of Native Americans to have magical powers, and often use magic stones to foresee the future,

[10] Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005), 72.

which had been a practice among Native Americans for thousands of years.[11] Elements of European witchcraft combined with African tradition as well. Witches possess the powers of invisibility, mind control and transmogrification and may punish enemies by draining them spiritually and physically. Witches, however, are differentiated from conjurers in that conjurers were often themselves Witch hunters- those who provide victims with protection from tormentor witches.[12] Hoodoo Conjure incorporates magical practices with natural elements: tree bark, animal shells and bones, hair, blood, plants and flowers, as well as herbs and even cooking spices.

Hoodoo Conjure demonstrates its similarity with Vodou in that spiritual forces are seen as neutral and amoral, thus they may be used to hex as well as to heal.[13] "Root work," which emerged during the period of slavery, became a highly legitimate form of medicine; the "root doctor" heals the sick and injured with natural elements combined with the roots of different types of plants.[14] The medicinal aspect of Hoodoo Conjure cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to its place as a religious system, because in the traditional world view of Vodou (from which Hoodoo Conjure is descendant), bodily illness is seen as a spiritual affliction and must be remedied as such. Occult Illness is believed to be caused by the "hexing," "tricking" or "crossing" of one person by another

[11] Ibid., 72.

[12] Ibid., , 42.

[13] *Mami Wata West African and Diaspora Vodoun,* http://www.mamiwata.com,

[14] Ibid. Root Work is a term synonymous with Conjure, but it denotes the medicinal aspect of it; root doctors are also called conjure doctors.

and may manifest itself in bad luck, such as the loss of a job or the end of a relationship.[15] Occult Illness is remedied by the removal of a hex or spell by a Conjurer.

Spiritual Illness is seen as a combination of both "tricking" and physical affliction; it is treated through both verbal blessing by spiritual healers and medicinal remedies. People trained as both conjurers and herbalists usually acquire their skills through study of herbalism with a family member. However, in other instances Conjurers attribute their practices to the receiving a calling to heal. [16] One called to healing is seen as a particularly powerful Conjurer, apart from those who learned their skills through study. [17] The practice of Hoodoo Conjure is one that is not exclusive to people of any particular background. Newbell Niles Puckett, for example, fashioned himself as a Hoodoo practitioner in his research for his book *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, describing his professional duties as those of diagnosis and relief of a "tricking" by identifying the charm used to harm the patient and destroying it.[18]

As Vodou holds that energy is amoral, so does Hoodoo Conjure; it is the practitioner who is the deciding factor in whether or not the folk magic is used in a detrimental or beneficial fashion. Essentially, what sets Hoodoo Conjure apart from Vodou is that it does not require adherence to the philosophical, trans-empirical, and religious beliefs of the Vodou religion. In essence, Hoodoo Conjure in its modern

---

[15] Faith Mitchell. *Hoodoo Medicine: Gullah Herbal Remedies* (Columbia: Summerhouse Press, 1999), 34.

[16] Ibid, 34-35.

[17] Ibid, 35.

[18] Newbell Niles Puckett. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 206-207.

American form may be inherited genealogically and learned through study and experience, without initiation into the Vodou religion.[19] This paper will serve as means through which to describe the seemingly paradoxical notion that a religious system of practice can exist without a formal doctrine or scripture behind it.

Historically, Hoodoo Conjure is not identified as such until the early twentieth century, by which time the beliefs of practitioners had melded and developed into a unique practice. Through the oppression of mainstream religious and political groups, the traditions of Vodou and its European counterparts were forced underground through intimidation and even legal prosecution.[20] It may be said that Hoodoo Conjure emerged as a means through which to deny any association with "Voodoo," the truth is that it had been developing during the preceding centuries; it was only identified as a separate practice during this time period. While traditional folk beliefs of slaves and of former slaves were almost always dismissed as devilry among whites, they were often looked down upon by blacks as well. Henry Bibb, a former slave, wrote of his experience with conjure in attempt to win the affections of a certain young lady. When his attempts to win her through charms failed, he referred to conjure as "…the superstitious notions of the great masses of southern slaves. It is given to them by tradition, and can never be erased, while the doors of education are bolted and barred against them." [21] The citation of conjure culture in African American society is one that is often used as a means to

---

[19] *Mami Wata West African and Diaspora Vodoun,* http://www.mamiwata.com,

[20] Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 53. Prosecution was usually under the accusation of "mail fraud."

[21] Henry Bibb. *Conjuration & Witchcraft* in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* edited by Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 76-80. Quoteation p. 80.

assert white supremacy as well; white people often assumed incorrectly that conjure served as an example of black "savagery" and "inferiority."[22]

The Academic Study of Hoodoo Conjure

Traditional religious practices like those in Hoodoo Conjure are also often cited as mere footnotes in the description of "how far people (in particular people of African descent) have come" in the development of their spiritual and religious convictions; the supposed decline of magico-religious practice as a sign of advancement to the supposedly civilized forms of religion.[23] This misunderstanding of folk religious practices, like Hoodoo Conjure, is not confined to the opinions of common people, of course, and is often reflected in the academic community as well. While the study of folk traditions like Hoodoo Conjure has become more respectful and professional in recent times, the development of the study of folk religions reflects the perceptions held by people of dominant American culture.

In the early stages of what became known as "anthropology" scholars often approached the traditions of peoples they perceived as "primitive" along developmental lines; the progression of societies from "fetishism" to the supposedly more developed system of religious monotheism.[24] Even scholarly works that deal directly with American folk religions like Hoodoo are often written from biased and often racist perspectives. The tendency of referring to African traditional folk practices as "savage" or

[22] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 5.

[23] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 7.

[24] David Murray, *Matter, Magic and Spirit. Representing Indian and African American Belief*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 17.

"superstitious" is not an exclusively white tendency in the scholarly world however; in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* W.E.B Dubois refers to conjure as "that vein of vague superstition which characterizes the unlettered Negro even today."[25]

While people almost always recognize in the present day that such conceptions are misguided, one cannot understand the development of the study of traditional religions without them. The scholars and thinkers who have studied said traditions, even from an often misinformed perspective, still laid the foundation for the scholarly understanding of them. While people see slanted viewpoints of religious study as detrimental to acceptance in current times, without the endeavors of people seeking to validate their own position of superiority in the past, scholars would have little information about the practices of certain religions. What one must endeavor to do in studying such things as American folk religion today is to gather information from older sources for descriptive and informative purposes concerning its practice; the often racist and condescending undertones of many works must be ignored in order to gather a more inclusive understanding of traditions like Hoodoo Conjure.

In spite of the often antagonistic approaches taken to the study of folk religious practices like Hoodoo Conjure, an underlying fascination with conjure culture has waxed and waned over the entire span of American history. Jeffrey Anderson identifies three particular periods of interest to be from1880 to 1900, 1920 to1940 and 1970 to the present.[26] Each of these periods of interest reflect the socio-political atmospheres of the nation; the first as the period of reconstruction after the Civil War, in which freedmen

[25] W.E.B Dubois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Norton, 1999) ,123 Cited in *Matter, Magic & Spirit,* 59.

[26] Ibid., 3.

were no longer forced by slave holders to keep their folk religious traditions “in the shadows” so to speak, thus making them more apparent to whites; the massive influx of Haitian immigrants into the southern states during and after the Haitian revolution and led to the establishment of New Orleans as the “Mecca” of American Hoodoo culture. During the period between 1920s and the 1940s, Americans were engulfed in the Great Depression and Jim Crow laws served to further oppress and separate African Americans.[27]

Hoodoo Conjure is often described by scholars as a “mechanism of control,” and in periods of oppression and upheaval will certainly bring said practices into public view, as they are more prevalent.[28] The present interest in Hoodoo Conjure may stem from both the second wave of Haitian immigrants into the United States due to political upheaval in the Caribbean and the development of modern scholasticism to view traditional religious practices as equals to the “great religions” of the world.[29] This paper will serve to examine both the cross-cultural influences of magical religious practices in the United States (however, the term “America” will typically be used, since Hoodoo Conjure developed in many ways before there was a “United States”), and the role that folk religious traditions like Hoodoo Conjure played during the era of slavery as well as during the turn of the nineteenth century.

---

[27] Ibid., 4. “Voodoo” refers to the culture of Vodou in New Orleans, and the magical religious practices of Hoodoo Conjure are usually included with it.

[28] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 62.

[29] Claudine Michel & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 54-58. This wave of immigration may have begun as early as the 1950s, when the Duvaliers ruled as dictators of Haiti. As a result of persecution and violence, many Haitians fled to the United States and Canada.

In more recent times there has also been the tendency to consider the practice of Hoodoo Conjure as a particular hindrance in the understanding of Vodou in America. Rod Davis, the author of *American Voudou: Journey into a Hidden World*, outlines his initial disdain for, but eventual acceptance of, Hoodoo Conjure. Initially referring to Hoodoo Conjure as the "petty hexing" involved in Vodou, he saw it as something that academics refer to as a "simulacrum," or a contrived version of Vodou masquerading as the real thing. It was only later, through his emersion in southern conjure culture, that he came to accept that "ranting against Hoodoo was ranting against history,"[30]

For someone like Davis, who sought to explore the Vodou religion in America, particularly in the south, Hoodoo Conjure stood as an example of how the *theology* of Vodou was largely stamped out, by the oppression of slavery and by the ignorance and fear of whites, but the *practice* of Vodou remained, as Hoodoo Conjure.[31] The historical attention to Hoodoo Conjure is one that is considerably lacking due in part to this opinion. The subsequent lack of documentation regarding the subject requires one to rely heavily on a relatively few number of sources. Fortunately, the most recent incarnations of the study of traditional religions and religious practices are much more inclusive and encompassing of the spiritual and pragmatic aspects of Hoodoo Conjure.

The research of Jeffrey Anderson, whose book *Conjure in African American Society,* published in 2005, serves as a comprehensive examination of conjure culture (Hoodoo Conjure essentially) and its importance in African American, southern and American culture and history. Anderson utilizes the works of Harry Middleton Hyatt, who

[30] Rod Davis, *American Voudou*: *Journey into a Hidden World* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998), 152-153

[31] Ibid., 153.

was one of the first scholars to explore conjure culture through his five volume work *Hoodoo -Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, published from 1970 to 1978.[32] Since only six hundred copies were printed, the utilization of this text is very difficult, thus Anderson's book serves as a method through which I have been able access its content. Anderson is also one of the few scholars who have managed to collect information concerning the interplay between traditions of the Native Americans with those of African Americans; his book is a central source in my chapter concerning said relations, as well as my thesis as a whole.

Carolyn Morrow Long's work *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, provides historical and modern accounts of the role of Hoodoo Conjure and its place in American commerce and society in the modern world, while other authors address the role of folk beliefs (like Hoodoo Conjure) in works concerning the history of the institution of slavery; the works of authors Albert Raboteau and Lawrence Levine provide invaluable historic prospective concerning Hoodoo Conjure culture. Anthony Pinn's *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* has been essential in my understanding of West African Vodou as well.

The writings of these scholars are the building blocks of this particular paper, as it will seek to present a historical examination of Hoodoo Conjure in its religious and cultural contexts.[33] While some mention will be made of Hoodoo Conjure in modern times, since traditional folk religions in the United States are very much living practices, this paper will focus upon their development during the colonial and antebellum periods

---

[32] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 22.

[33] To clarify; "Vodou" identifies the traditional religion of western Africa and Haiti; "Voodoo" denotes the incarnation of Vodou in New Orleans that is a blending of the Vodou religion and Hoodoo Conjure; "Hoodoo Conjure" identifies the pragmatic and magical practices of Vodou that have survived in America without the theology of Vodou.

specifically in the southern region of the United States, as well as in parts of Missouri. I will proceed in my examination in three chapters; I will begin with the brief history of the African and Haitian roots of American Hoodoo Conjure, will move to the exchange of beliefs and practices between European African and Native Americans during the colonial period of the United States, and will conclude with a description of the role of Hoodoo Conjure as a means of cultural identity, particularly during the eras of slavery and reconstruction. The time periods of the third and fourth chapters, in many ways will overlap one another, since folk religious traditions like Hoodoo Conjure are continuously developing and changing. In order to understand how a certain religious system has developed in the New World (and specifically in America) one must first explore its beginnings, thus I being my examination of Hoodoo Conjure in the traditional Vodou religion of Western Africa. [34]

[34] Chapter two largely examines West African and Haitian Vodou, but one must keep in mind that there were numerous religions brought to the New World from the Old that influenced American conjure culture; however it is my belief that Vodou presents the strongest relationship with Hoodoo . I also felt it necessary to describe Vodou, as to make it distinct from Hoodoo Conjure.

CHAPTER 2

THE AFRICAN & HAITIAN ROOTS OF HOODOO CONJURE

While Hoodoo Conjure is a relatively new religious practice, as it developed after the colonization of the New World, its roots lie largely in African Vodou, a religion that traces its tradition more than ten thousand years into the past, to the Kongo region in central Africa and the Fon kingdom of Dahomey (the present day Bight of Benin) in West Africa.[35] While it would seem distracting to describe the religious beliefs of the Vodou religion in a thesis addressing the role of Hoodoo Conjure in the United States, it is important to recognize the roots of the practice in order to understand how it has adapted to the New World environment. The magical practices of Vodou are entwined its cosmological and theological belief structure, thus this structure should be understood.

The West African Roots of American Hoodoo Conjure

Like many African traditions, Vodou does not make any distinction between religion and culture. The Vodou religion is as much a part of life as breathing, and provides an inclusion with the natural world as well as with the spiritual world. Existence, in all its forms, is seen as an exchange of energies, from deity to human

[35] Michel,Claudine & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, 1-2. The world Vodou is a derivative of *vodu*, which translates to “spirit” in the language of the Fon and Ewe of western Africa.

being and from the heavens to the earth.[36] Contrary to the conceptions held by many westerners that Vodou is a solely polytheistic and "animistic" religion, Vodou is in fact an extremely complex and organized set of beliefs with a moral center, all interchangeable and intertwined. Vodou is not what one traditionally refers to as a "polytheistic" religion, but rather a "diffused monotheistic" faith that believes in a supreme god and several lesser deities beneath it. The Fon people of Dahomey believed in a supreme god, above all others, named *Nana-Buluku*, who is male and female, transcendent and the creator of all. Nana-Buluku, however, is not the recipient of worship and veneration, and is seen as beyond the realm of human comprehension. Praise is given instead to the children of Nana-Buluku, the twin deity *Mawu-Lisa*. Mawu, the female half of the pair, was given dominion over the night and the moon and was believed to reside in the west; Lisa, the male half, was given power over the day and the sun and is believed to reside in the east. Mawu-Lisa provides the energy that is the essence of life, for the human soul and all other forms of existence. [37]

The importance of the family as the cohesive unit in African culture is prevalent in the hierarchy of the Dahomey *vodun*, all of whom are related to each other in a familial structure. Mawu-Lisa is the parent of the other Dahomey vodun, all of whom serve specific functions. The *Sakpata* are the offspring of *Dada Zodj* and *Nyohwe Ananu* and are the deities who control aspects of life on earth: *Gu* controls metal and war; *Age* the wilderness and its animals as well as the hunt; *Djo* controls the space between the earth and the sky (the atmosphere) and human destiny; *Hebiosso* owns the sky and punishes wrongdoing with thunder; *Sogbo* possesses the power to create children; *Agbe* and

[36]Anthony B. Pinn. *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 3-5.

[37] Ibid., 13.

Naete are given control of the water and seas; *Ayaba* controls fire.[38] *Legba* is a vital vodun in that he serves to mediate between the vodun and human beings. It is believed that Mawu-Lisa bestowed each vodun with his or her own unique language, making communication with each other, and certainly with humans, impossible. Legba then, serves to bridge these gaps in communication. Vodouists do not worship Legba directly; they simply pay respect to him in order to secure favor in his dealings with the other deities. Unlike the other vodun, Legba has no dwelling of his own and is everywhere serving as a "middle man."[39] Legba also serves to open the barriers between the earth and the heavens, which is why he is usually called upon in the beginning of Vodou ceremonies.

The world view of Vodou is centered on the concept of the balance of energies. This is represented by *Da Ayido Hwedo*, the divine serpent who assisted Nana Buluku in creation and exists coiled around the earth, shaping the globe and sustaining its balance; *Da* can be seen in the form of a rainbow. The human soul is understood as existing in three non- divisible elements, all described by their actions during creation: *Selido* (personality) is the portion of the divine that resides in the body; *Semedo* (mind or instinct), inhabits the body as it is molded and becomes the individual soul and, *Semekokato* (biological representation) seeks a body to guard during life. [40] Ancestors are also held in high esteem in Vodou; it is believed that the dead provide protection and guidance to the living if they are properly venerated and respected.

---

[38] Ibid., 13.

[39] Ibid , 14.

[40] Ibid , 14.

The living are charged with the task of appropriately recognizing the authority of their ancestors. If an ancestor is not properly buried or given appropriate veneration by their living relatives, then it is believed that they may most certainly return to the earth and walk amongst the living. Many rituals are devoted to preventing the mixing of the world of the living and the dead.[41]

Vodou in Haiti

The European slave trade into Haiti (then controlled by the Spanish and called Hispaniola) after 1492 brought together more than fifteen thousand African slaves of different ethnic groups, who spoke different languages and possessed many different sets of beliefs.[42] This mixing of so many different ways of life in a relatively small geographic location led to the development of the western incarnation of Vodou. The African slaves were confronted with a very harsh, inhumane and alien environment, and a different system of beliefs emerged in response. The vodun of Dahomey evolved into the lwa of the Haitian tradition.

Lwa, unlike the vodun, can be malevolent and meddlesome and have a place within the everyday lives of Vodouists. The lwa can "mount" or enter the body of a believer at anytime and possess them, controlling their actions and leaving them with no memory of the experience afterwards.[43] This reordering of the powers of the vodun into those of the lwa was almost certainly a response to the attempts on the parts of Spanish masters to convert slaves to Catholicism, often forcing them to swear oaths against

[41] Ibid., 14.

[42] Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for Spirit*, 19.

[43] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy,* 164.

Vodou practices.[44] Slaves were starved, beaten, worked to the point of physical collapse and death, given new names, intermixed and separated from their families in an attempt to obliterate any semblance of community and identity that would remind them of their African roots.[45] The Vodun of African tradition were considered too benevolent and detached, considering the brutal and extremely traumatic experiences of their followers; thus, the Haitian lwa emerged as more involved deities in the lives of their followers and were certainly instrumental in aiding adherents in their resistance to total conversion. Vodou was kept alive as a link to their lost homes in Africa and continued to be practiced in secret. The lwa of the Vodouists in Haiti are certainly very similar to those of the Dahomey in Africa, but possess qualities that are more geared toward human emotions and states of being as opposed to the control over the elements of the earth. The supreme god was known as *Bondeye*, who is not actively involved in the affairs of human beings, meeting instead with the lesser deities between heaven and earth to answer the questions of men concerning worldly problems.[46]

Haitian slaves recognized early on that in order to preserve their culture in an oppressive and alien environment, they would need to adapt their beliefs to exist "under the radar," so to speak, of their Christian European captors. After France gained control of the island from the Spanish (who then re- christened the island Saint Dominigue) , King Louis XIV issued the Code Noïr (Black Code) in 1685, declaring it illegal for slaves to congregate in large numbers without the supervision of whites in order to prevent the practice of traditional religions and possible insurrection. The Code Noïr also made any

---

[44] Pinn*, Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 19.

[45] Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for Spirit,* 21.

[46] Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* , 20.

religion aside from Catholicism illegal, and any practice of Vodou was considered "Satanism." The Catholic religion was even given as an excuse to justify slavery, arguing that it presented Christians with the opportunity to "save the souls of the heathen Africans" through conversion.[47] Ironically, it was Catholicism that presented Vodouists with a means through which to preserve their culture.

Vodouists in Saint Dominigue adapted their veneration of the lwa by identifying them as synonymous with many of the Catholic saints. Not only did the saints resemble the lwa in image, they also mirrored them in some aspects of personality. Saints, like the lwa, had special days in which they were to be worshiped specifically; they also reacted similarly to dishonesty and disloyalty. The two systems, of deity and divine humanity run almost exactly parallel to one another and provided African slaves with a means through which to practice their religion without the fear of severe punishment.[48] The pantheon of Haitian lwa were paid respect and homage through altars built around images of Catholic saints, thus giving worshippers the freedom to practice their religion.

Damballah, or the divine snake god, represents tranquility and harmony, grace and strength and is as old as humanity. Thus he was likened to Saint Patrick, who was responsible for driving snakes from Ireland.[49] Legba was seen as a counterpart to Saint Peter-- given his importance as a messenger between the deities and human beings. His purpose as a gate- keeper places importance upon showing him proper veneration and respect for Vodouists; Legba must be approached carefully. Since Legba is

---

[47] Hurbon, *Voodoo: Search for Spirit,* 23.

[48] Alfred Metraux. *Voodoo in Haiti*. 324. It is argued that, over time, the Catholic saints were no long considered "masks" for the worship of the Lwa, and were revered in their own right.

[49] Ibid , 324.

represented by a “creolized” (born in Haiti and adapted to slave culture) image of a man with a smoking pipe and large bag in tow, who is often seen as a trickster; it was the mistake of Christians to liken him with the devil.[50] Other representations of the saints and their lwa counterparts include the Virgin Mary, who is identified as *Erzulie*, the lwa of love, beauty and the sexual self. She is considered jealous and needy of compliments, and is represented as a beautiful young woman. Saint James on a white horse was identified as *Ogou,* the lwa of war and the punisher of unbelievers, who provides people with the secrets of Vodou. Saint Ulrich provides an image for *Agwe*, the lwa of the sea, who provides protection and guidance to fisherman and others who work in water. Saint John the Baptist serves to represent Cousin *Zaka*, the lwa of agriculture seen as the representation of the peasant class.[51]

There exists much debate among the scholarly community as to the relationship between saints and lwa in the Vodou tradition. Alfred Métraux argues that the identification of the lwa as Catholic saints “is a mistake, for in most cases there has been no real assimilation or common identity. The equivalence of gods and saints exists in so far as the Voodooist has used pictures of saints to represent his own gods.”[52] Métraux goes on to assert that no one has ever been possessed by a saint. George Simpson argues to the contrary; he states that he had, in fact witnessed “Vodunists possessed by St. John, St. Peter, St. Anthony, Archangel St. Michael, and, perhaps other saints…”[53] Simpson agrees with Métraux, however, in that “the Loa do not borrow

---

[50] Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience, 20.*

[51] Ibid., 20-23.

[52] Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 324.

the attributes and characteristics of the saints to whom they are supposed to correspond" and that the saint "stripped of its own personality takes on that of the Loa." [54] In essence, both of these thinkers support the idea that it is the images of the Catholic saints that aid in the visualization and conceptualization of the lwa on the part of the Vodouists, but disagree as to the relationship between the lwa and the saints. Other similarities between Catholicism and Vodou include a shared belief in an afterlife, belief in the existence of demons or evil spirits and, of course, the belief in a supreme god.[55]

As with any religion, divisions within Vodou did occur. While ritual practices did remain predominantly similar, differences in the ways in which the personalities of the lwa were perceived did emerge. Under the tyranny of slavery, the balance of relations between the Rada lwa (the Dahomean vodun) no longer sufficed in dealing with the absurdity of the suffering experienced as a slave. Thus the Petwo tradition emerged, one more aggressive and angry, that saw the lwa as more assertive and vengeful than the lwa of Rada tradition. While Rada Vodou revolves around the concept of balance and harmony, Petwo Vodou provided an outlet for anger and contempt. Rada Vodou was represented by coolness, Petwo by heat. [56] The Rada tradition was largely of West African Dahomean origin and sought peace, harmony and reconciliation; this may have also accounted largely for the blending of African and Roman Catholic practice. The

---

[53] George Eaton Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica and Haiti.* (Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies University of Puerto Rico, 1980), 287.

[54] Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 323. in *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica and Haiti,* 287

[55] *Vodun (and Related Religions).* http://www.religioustolerance.org/voodoo. htm

[56] Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 164. The name Rada is derived from the designation *Arada*, used to identify slaves that were captured from the city of the same name on the coast of Dahomey. Petwo is largely believed to be derived from the name Pedro, after the Vodou priest Don Pedro, who played a vital part in the Haitian revolution.

Petwo tradition, which was largely Kongo in origin was a much more aggressive incarnation of Vodou, and is associated with the invocation of spirits and charms to both heal the afflicted and punish the wicked.[57] This division points out the belief on the part of Vodou that energy in itself is amoral, not inherently "good" or "evil" and can be swayed in either direction depending upon the actions of deity and the individual. Petwo Vodou did not believe in a separate system of deities; they simply reinterpreted their personalities.[58]

For example, Legba is renamed *Kafou Legba* and is seen as extremely vengeful if his will is not carried out to his satisfaction; Erzulie is reinterpreted as *Ezili Danto*, a woman of great rage, who destroys those who fail her and provides protection for those in grave peril. Ogou is seen as *Ogou Ferary*, the lwa of iron and war who inflicts great physical harm upon those who disobey him.[59] This emergence of a two-sided incarnation on Vodou may have in many ways shaped what would emerge as Hoodoo Conjure practices in the United States. The Petwo side of Vodou is one largely of action; it can be said that it is the Petwo incarnation of Vodou that is recognizable in American Hoodoo Conjure.

The Petwo movement within Vodou is believed to have been headed by a man named Don Pedro, considered to be the pioneer of the entire movement. The dances he performed were believed to have inspired slaves to fight and resist the abuse of their captors, and may have leaded (at least indirectly) to the Haitian revolution and to the

[57] Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit,*164.

[58] Ibid., 24.

[59] Ibid , 25.

massive influx of Vodou into the United States. The upheaval in Haiti led to a massive migration of emigrants to the southern United States, in particular Louisiana, and led to an explosion of the Americanized form of the Vodou religion, which came to be known as "Voodoo" in the United States[60]

The Survival of Vodou in America

It is important to recognize that Vodou did not survive in its purest form in the North American colonies and later the United States. There are many possible explanations for the discrepancy between the survival of African religions in the Caribbean with those of America, the most prevalent being religious and demographic. A possible reason given for the fact that Vodou has thrived in other countries and been largely stamped out in America is the puritanical nature of American religion. Catholicism in nations like Haiti, Cuba and Brazil provides a rich tradition through which Vodou may be practiced in a manner that reflects its own custom, that is to say, the images of the saints, sacraments that may be likened to certain Vodou rituals, candles, incense, statues and holy water serve as talisman to the Vodouist as well as to the Catholic.[61] In contrast, American Christianity has been dominated largely by the Protestant denominations, which do not condone the veneration of idols and recognize only two of the seven Catholic sacraments. Catholicism also places more importance upon fraternities of religious piety and, in fact, served as a means through which to preserve the community as well as African heritage. American Evangelical

[60] "Voodoo" will be used in this paper to identify the culture of Vodou and Hoodoo Conjure in New Orleans.

[61] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 87.

Protestantism places far less emphasis upon the community and more upon the sanctity of the Bible and a more individualistic conversion experience.[62]

Acculturation and assimilation also account for the decline in Vodou practice in the United States, with demographics playing a major part in the process. Albert Raboteau offers a more concrete rationale for the stronger presence of traditions in the Caribbean apart from any theological theory-- namely the difference in demographics of slave populations. The total number of slaves imported in the New World from the beginning of the slave trade until 1861 was 9,566,000, of which only 427,000 went to the English colonies in North America, accounting for roughly 4.5 percent of the total population. The nations of South America and the Caribbean accounted for the majority of the remaining slave population, with South America- -in particular Brazil--importing eight and a half times the number of slaves than North America did.[63] The Caribbean received 42.2 percent of slaves from Africa; Haiti received 864,000, Jamaica 748,000 and Cuba 702, 000.[64] These differences in population affected the survival of traditional religions in each region, largely due to the influence, or lack thereof, of European traditions.

The institution of slavery in the Caribbean islands was much larger in scale than that of the North American colonies, as indicated by the aforementioned statistics. This difference in populations of slaves accounted for the differences in interaction between European slave holders and the enslaved. In the larger plantations of the Caribbean,

---

[62] Ibid , 88.

[63] Ibid 89-90.

[64] Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World,* Table 1.1 p. 4-5

African slaves had little to no contact with Europeans, as the ratio of whites to blacks was relatively small and slaves usually worked under the eye of an overseer, as opposed to alongside their white captors as many American slaves did. In the North American colonies, large scale plantations like the ones of the Caribbean were relatively few in number. Raboteau outlines the argument of Franklin Frazier, who asserts that the smaller populous of slaves made it easier for white captors to control their congregation, often making it illegal for groups of five or more to meet without white supervision. This assertion of control was also manifested through the destruction of the familial unit through the internal American slave trade, thus making social cohesion among slave groups extremely difficult and leading, in Frazier's opinion, to the eradication of African traditions in America.[65]

Another important fact to consider in the discrepancy between American and Caribbean slave populations are their rates of increase. While the North American colonies received only 4.5 percent of the African slaves, the population of African Americans in the United States accounted for 31 percent of the population in the mid-twentieth century, while the nations of the Caribbean, that imported around 43 percent of slaves from Africa, account for only 20 percent of the Afro-American population in the New World.[66] Many differing explanations are given for such a divergence of numbers, including differences in the practice of the slave trade itself.

In the Caribbean, slaves were, in general, in poorer health due to the spread of disease more abundant in tropical climates, thus making natural reproduction more difficult. In addition the supply of slaves directly from Africa was one that was

[65] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 51-52.

[66] Ibid., 91.

inexpensive and continuously available, which made encouraging slaves to have children counterproductive, and slave holders often purposefully imported more male slaves than females to discourage it.[67] This continuous supply of African slaves may account for the continuing existence of traditional African beliefs in the Caribbean that so greatly shadows their somewhat partial survival in America.

Slaves who lived in the more temperate climate of North America were less susceptible to rampant disease, although the health of slaves was often considerably worse than it had been in their native countries in Africa. Personal hygiene was of considerable importance in the tropical forest regions in Africa, and the population generally bathed much more frequently and took better care of their teeth and gums than their European counterparts. Such practices were, of course, much harder to maintain in captivity and were often discouraged by white captors.[68] However, in comparison with the conditions of the Caribbean slaves, general health was better and reproduction higher in North America. Without the steady influx of slaves from Africa as it existed in the Caribbean, North American slavery was much more dependent on the healthy birth rates of slaves, and, within a few generations the majority of slaves in America were American born, with no conscious memory of the traditional beliefs of their African heritage.[69] Thus, Vodou in America was altered and adapted to life in America, evolving into Hoodoo Conjure in the present day. It is important to distinguish

---

[67] Ibid., 91.

[68] William D. Pierson. F*rom Africa to America. African American History from the Colonial Era to the Early Republic, 1526-1790* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 99.

[69] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 92.

Hoodoo Conjure from Vodou while still recognizing that many of its practices and traditions are rooted in Vodou and shaped by its history.

Traditional African religions, like Vodou, are rooted in experience--in action rather than words.[70] Hoodoo Conjure is an obvious example of such convictions, as it is unidentifiable along lines of scripture and sermon. Hoodoo Conjure is what is identifiable as the pragmatic aspects of Vodou that survived by adaptation in the New World. What is generally agreed upon in the scholarly community is that the religious aspects (that is to say religious in the traditional understanding of the term) of Vodou largely disappeared in America, due in part to acculturation, oppression of religious practices and conversion. Hoodoo Conjure remains as the practical aspect of Vodou, manifesting in the causal relationships of good and ill will between human beings.[71] Vodou however is not the only contributing tradition that Hoodoo Conjure owes its heritage to. Many of its elements to the blending and sharing of folk religious beliefs and practices between Africans, Europeans and Native Americans who often lived and worked side by side in America.

---

[70] Jacob K. Olupona & Sulayman S. Nyang , *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti. Mouton de Gruyter*.(New York: Mouton de Gruyter*),* 68.

[71] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 275-88 cited in *Spiritual Merchants*, 74.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERRACIAL INTERACTION IN HOODOO CONJURE: FORMING AN AMERICAN TRADITION

While Vodou may have been largely eradicated in its original form in the American continent, many of the practical traditions involved in it survived and blended with those of Europeans and Native Americans. Documentation addressing the cultural and spiritual practices of the races usually manifests itself in two ways: African to European and vice-versa, and African to Indian and vice-versa. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to divide the understanding of exchange between the peoples of America into two sections outlining their similarities and instances of exchange. However, it is important to keep in mind that it was the combination of beliefs of *all three* of these groups that led to the modern incarnation of Hoodoo Conjure in the Unites States.

While mainstream white culture has often forgotten the folk traditions of medieval Christians in western and central Europe, their practices were in many ways similar to those of African priests and conjurers. The syncretism of practices between these two groups of people may have allowed for some of the elements of both traditions to survive in America as one. Hoodoo Conjure, it is important to note, did not grow solely out of Vodou in America; it combines methods of practice involved in the kingdom of Dahomey as well as the Kongo region in central Africa. It is the magical practice within Vodou that are very similar to that of European (mostly English) cunning folk and

allowed for cultural exchange.[72] While history often overlooks the supernatural history of European peoples in favor of organized Christianity and dismisses their similar African counterparts as "backward superstition," Europeans do have a rich spiritual tradition that in many ways runs parallel with that of the Africans they enslaved in the New World.

European Folk Religion

In the centuries preceding the colonization of the Americas, the fear of witches in Europe led to the execution of sixty thousand to one million people during the late Middle Ages. Witches were those believed to have made "pacts with the devil" and to possess supernatural powers, such as the ability to shape shift, transform people into animals, bewitch cows to keep them from providing milk and even murder their enemies through the manipulation of the spirits. It is important to note however, that like Vodou, European elements of American folk practices have their roots in religion. Christian folk traditions included the veneration of saints and lesser deities, the belief in spirits and the use of sacramental charms and amulets in religious ceremony.[73] The folk religious traditions of the French, Spanish and Portuguese were blended with those of African conjurers; the most apparent instance of cultural exchange however, was between African conjurers and English cunning folk.

The striking similarities between the practices of folk religious traditions of the Celtic peoples of western Europe and those of western and central Africa are numerous and obvious, but what is often overlooked is the striking similarity through which these

[72] Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 10. The word "witchcraft" comes from the Old English word *wiccecraeft,* meaning "knowledge" and specified an understanding of magical and medicinal practices. European folk religious practitioners are traditionally referred to as "witches," although many of the folk religious traditions of witches and "cunning folk" had Christian influences as well.

[73] Long, *Spiritual Merchants,* 9.

peoples assimilated their “pagan” beliefs with those of Christianity. Like the adherents to Vodou, Europeans, in particular the people of the British Isles, adapted many of their beliefs to accommodate those of Christianity. The presence of Christian missionaries in Europe led to the widespread conversion of the continent; however, it was not adopted in a purely scriptural or theological form, but rather through adaptations of pagan belief. Christianity was seen as an essentially polytheistic tradition, with God as the supreme creator being and Jesus and the Catholic saints were conceived as the lesser deities with specific roles. The Christian devil was viewed as a kind of “trickster” figure, the pagan mother goddess was analogous to the Virgin Mary, and the horned animal gods of sexuality in pagan tradition came to represent demons and the devil.[74]

This consolidation of the identities of certain spiritual figures, of course, is analogous to those of the vodun and lwa of African and Haitian tradition. Even after the eventual Christianization of the British Isles, certain folk religious traditions continued in Christian worship. The worship of Catholic saints took on many magico-religious elements; offerings of food were left at efficacies of the saints and relics played the role of what may be referred to as fetish objects in medieval times. The saints, like the vodun and lwa were believed to possess the power to inflict and relieve disease and misfortune.[75]

---

[74] Ibid., 9.

[75] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971) ,26-27.

European & African Conjure in America

Aside from the underlying religious elements, European folk religious practices mirrored those of African traditions as well. European cunning men and African diviners often served as medical practitioners, and in many cases as detectives in determining the identity of a person who committed some form of infraction (typically theft) or malevolent charm. One example of a ritual that would become a common practice in American Hoodoo Conjure involves the use of both magical and religious elements to determine the perpetrator of wrongdoing. In order to determine the guilty, a key was placed inside a particular book (the Bible was usually chosen) with the names of suspects written on slips of papers and inserted sequentially into the hollow end of the key. When the particular slip of paper with the guilty party's name was inserted the book would "wag" and fall out of the hand of the person who held it. [76] This ritual was later practiced in the Americas after taking on certain African elements; the Bible was suspended from a string and would "wag" itself at the mention of the guilty suspect's name.[77]

The underlying common factors of African conjure and European witchcraft are the power to navigate and manipulate the spirit world to influence the present world, and to bend it to one's will. Shape- shifting in particular was a practice parallel in African and European tradition. Whereas European witches were said to have the ability to transform into cats and rabbits, African conjurers could also transform into cats, owls and bats. The underlying notion of cannibalism was also present in both European and

[76]Ibid., 214.

[77] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 77.

African tradition, which in turn led to fear of people with magical powers. However, it is important to point out that while cannibalism referred to the eating of human flesh for European witches, it meant a more figurative eating of the soul for African conjurers.[78]

Fantastic notions of and beliefs about witchcraft followed Europeans to the colonies, where witches were persecuted and punished as they were in the Old World. It is interesting to note that ninety percent of the accusations of witchcraft were made against people in the northern American colonies, while such accusations in the South were largely ignored. This may point to a much more tolerant position of people in the South to magical religious practice. Fear of witches was certainly still present and certain benefactors called “witch masters” were often employed to protect an individual and their family from the powers of a malevolent witch. This, of course, is an obvious parallel to the Hoodoo Conjure doctor, who served as protector and curer of the harm done by evil sorcery.[79] There were, of course, those in both European and African traditions who practiced benevolent magic as well. “White witches” specialized in divination, protective spells and charms for luck and love. The practice of fortune telling or divination was also one that African and European folk magic shared. Playing cards were often used as ways to predict the future or diagnose illness. [80]

Perhaps the most commonly shared practice of both European and African magical folk practices were the use of talismans and charms, as well as the use of herbs and medicinal plants. The Fon people of Dahomey kingdom used charms called *gbo* as cures for disease and defense against other conjurers who may have wished

[78] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 54.

[79] Ibid 53.

[80] Ibid., 61.

them harm; gbo were revered and often "fed" with blood, liquor, palm oil and various items made of corn flour and hot peppers.[81] Gbo usually took the form of every-day items such as soaps, pendants and drinks and were chosen for their ability to bond, knot or pierce in order to assert their roles as vessels of power and protection.[82] In medieval times, Europeans would wear talismans with Biblical inscriptions around their necks; the *agnus dei*, an amulet made of candle wax and blessed by the Pope, was believed to provide defense against assault from the devil. [83]

Religious medicine was often practiced through the use of natural antidotes in conjunction with spiritual healing. For example, when a particular person was ill, it was believed that their social and spiritual condition was altered as well, often due to some form of infection by an evil spirit (often believed to be the devil) on behalf of a malevolent person. Thus, a person would have to divulge all of their social dealings in order for the healer to produce a remedy to break the connection of malice to cure them.[84] This influence over the spirit world in order to heal one's person in the physical world is one possible example of how folk religious tradition is identifiable as "this-worldly" religion; it does not seek to influence this world to determine one's place in another, but rather the opposite. The combination of both spiritual and bodily healing was so prevalent in the south during colonial and antebellum times that conjure doctors (often called "root doctors") were often favored over white medical practitioners. Some root doctors petitioned local governments to be given the right to practice medicine

[81] Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 7.

[82] Suzanne Preston Blier. "*Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou"* in *Spiritual Merchants*, 7.

[83] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 30-31.

[84] Piersen, *From Africa to America.* 99.

formally; other enslaved root doctors were even granted their freedom in exchange for the secrets of their medicinal practices.[85]

While it would be easy to dismiss such parallels between African and European traditions as coincidence, and to see their interaction as something that happened inadvertently and as a result of living in close quarters, the truth of the matter is that people were well aware of folk religious practices and the equivalence of African traditions with European. European charms and supernatural world views ensured that African traditions would survive, as white folks were often clients of black conjurers and even participated in particular Vodou religious rituals alongside blacks.[86] Black conjure culture also influenced white supernaturalism, with white slave holders often taking an interest in magico-religious practices as a means through which to create an atmosphere of power for themselves, and, in turn, foster greater obedience on the part of their captives.

European folk religion served both to preserve and to alter African magico-religious practices through exchange and influence. While outwardly doing everything possible to suppress traditional African religious practices, European elements were simultaneously absorbed into many folk religious traditions of African slaves.[87] The relationship between whites and blacks in terms of conjure was not always antagonistic of course, in that blacks often turned to white conjurors for support and vise versa.[88]

---

[85] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 64.

[86] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 56.

[87] Ibid., 51.The notion of whites during the eighteenth century was of "Voodoo" as blasphemous sorcery that fostered slave rebellion (as it did in Haiti); thus conjure, if discovered by whites, was often prosecuted under law.

While the syncretism between European and African folk tradition is obvious, the transformation of the traditions of both into a more "Americanized" hybrid of beliefs known as Hoodoo Conjure is one that took place as the result of the intentional teaching of folk religious traditions of one group to the other.

Whites would often practice European-style conjure in order to learn more about Africa magical practices, and blacks who visited white conjurers also acquired knowledge of their folk practices.[89] Initially, the exchange of traditions and beliefs of European and African conjurers was an exchange between the indentured servants of the New World. Later, in the colonial period, it was slavery, as evil an institution as it was, that allowed for the blending of traditions from the European and African continents through the interactions of blacks and whites living in the same space both as slave and captor. Through observation and conversation, ideas were transmitted about supernatural beliefs common to both African and European traditions.[90]

The supernatural elements of folk religion in Europe (that is, the ones not rooted in Christianity) also influenced the folk religious beliefs of blacks in the eighteenth century. Horseshoes and rabbit's feet were seen as tools of protection against malevolent conjurers; horseshoes protected one's home from being entered by witches and rabbit's feet were seen as protection from bodily afflictions like cramps and arthritis.[91] Evil charms were also present in folk religious traditions; the conjure bottle (or

---

[88] Ibid 56.

[89] Ibid 62.

[90] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 4.

[91] Ibid., 60-61.

"witch bottle" in European tradition) was a glass bottle filled with spiritual items believed to have the power to harm. These bottles were especially prevalent in areas such as Virginia, which were settled largely by the English.[92] Other elements of European origin evident in Hoodoo Conjure are the use of candles in alters built to please spirits, the use of brooms in conjuring ceremonies, and the use of salt for protection against malevolent charms.[93] Blacks and whites interacted with one another closely during the colonial period, as slaves who worked in a domestic capacity often lived with their captors, making the incorporation of many folk magic practices of whites with those of blacks relatively easy. People of mixed racial identity were also taught certain practices by their European and African parents.[94]

Some of the most prevalent instances of African and European exchange in spiritual practices are those of southern American customs concerning death and mourning. The traditional practice of covering mirrors and stopping clocks often practiced by Africans in both antebellum and modern times grows out of European custom. Mirrors are covered or turned towards a wall due to the belief that a mirror could be "infected" if it reflected the image of a corpse and would never reflect things clearly again; this stems from the medieval European belief that someone looking into a mirror immediately after a person died would see the deceased looking over their shoulder.[95] Clocks were stopped at the moment of death due to the notion that they

[92] Ibid., 61.

[93] Ibid., 69-70.

[94] Ibid., 62.

[95] Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* , 81-82.

would chime thirteen times upon the next hour (which was bad luck), stemming from the European belief that clocks left ticking after someone's death would run down so badly that they would never keep the time correctly again.[96] The interplay in religious custom was not solely from European to African; mourning and burial rituals demonstrate the influence that blacks often had upon whites in early America.

Funerals served as important rites due to the reverence of dead ancestors in traditional West African religions. Since the ancestors were often feared as well as revered, proper burial custom was seen as essential to the appeasement of any anger that the deceased may have still harbored, thus giving the dead no reason to linger among the living. Early practice of funeral rituals among Africans in colonial America were a far cry from the somber ceremonies of their often Puritan Christian neighbors; funeral ceremonies were emotional and often euphoric in style, as death was seen as a cause for celebration since the deceased had returned home and to the ancestors in Africa.[97] This conception of death and funerals as important rights of passage passed to European-Americans, and by the eighteenth century, white Christians in the south had adopted more emotional mourning rituals and a concept of death as a joyous occasion in which one returned home in the hereafter.[98] It is also noted that funeral rituals (for black slaves as well as white slave-holders) were often instances in which racial tensions would relax in shared mourning and celebration for the deceased.[99]

---

[96] Ibid., 82.

[97] Piersen, *From Africa to America*, 97.

[98] Ibid., 97.

[99] Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 80.

Newbell Niles Puckett, the author of one of the first works addressing African American folk religious traditions, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, asserts that the adoption of European elements into African folk religious tradition was one of imposition-in which some elements were included only when blacks lived under the oppression of whites, with African elements surviving in their absence. [100] The more modern understanding of this relationship is one of voluntary exchange, since not all relations between the races were antagonistic. Puckett, a white man, even spent some time as a Hoodooist himself, acknowledging what he calls the "professional spirit" of conjure doctors and the willingness that they had to "swap" both medicinal and magical information with him.[101]

African and Native American Interaction in Colonial America

The interaction between European and African conjurers was not the only instance of race relations in the development of Hoodoo Conjure. The contribution of Native Americans to Hoodoo Conjure in the United States is one that has very little mention in the history of the study of the practice. The documented accounts of race relations in the American colonies, at least in the past, have tended to focus mainly upon relations between white settlers and so-called "peripheral subject peoples" living around them.[102] While more recent historians have examined and recorded the exchanges that often took place between Native Americans and African slaves during

---

[100] Ibid., 78.

[101] Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. 206 in *Conjure in African American Society*. 62.

[102] Virginia Kennedy, *The Space that is America,* in *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 198.

the colonial period, the exchange of religious ideas (especially traditional folk religious ideas) is rarely addressed. A possible reason for lack of documentation concerning the exchange of religious ideas may be the underlying racism and paranoia that existed on the part of whites during the colonial period.

By the eighteenth century, African and Native populations outnumbered whites in southern colonies like South Carolina and Georgia nearly four to one. By the mid-1700's the white population of South Carolina totaled twenty five thousand, while the local slave and Indian populations stood at forty and sixty thousand respectively. [103] White colonists lived in constant fear that the two peoples would join forces to drive their white exploiters out of America; so many measures were taken on the part of whites to prevent contact between them. Laws were enacted to prevent any black person (slave or free) from entering Indian country and Indians peoples were under constant pressure to return escaped slaves who had entered their country; treaties that were signed between what became the United States and Indian nations like the Creek, Cherokee and Choctaw almost always had clauses that required the return of any escaped slaves that may have been living in their land.[104]

There were also many instances of whites and state governments deliberately pitting the two groups against one another as well, in attempt to remind them that "they were not friends." For example, black slaves were incorporated into the South Carolina militia during government conflicts with the Tuscarora, Yamasee and Cherokee nations,

---

[103] Gary B. Nash *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 292.

[104] Ibid., 292.

while Indians were often employed to help put down slave rebellions. During the Stono Rebellion of 1739, the South Carolina assembly provided guns, ammunition, clothes and supplies to Indian bounty hunters and promised £50 for each slave brought back alive, as well as £25 for every dead slave returned.[105]

In spite of every attempt made by the white governments of the south to prevent interaction between the native and slave populations, cultural exchange still took place in America during colonial times. The interaction between African Americans and Native Americans was largely concentrated in the southern regions of the American colonies. While intercultural exchange occurred in every instance of contact between the peoples of the New World, the populations of the south reflect the intermingling of peoples to the greatest degree in the colonial period. Blacks came into contact with Indians as much as they did with whites and exchanged ideas in similar fashions.

What is often overlooked in the study of race relations in colonial America, particularly between Native peoples and those of African descent, is that fact that slavery was not a dichotomous practice between blacks and whites. Slavery, like Hoodoo Conjure, was born from the intimate triangular relationship between African, European and American peoples. Native Americans were bought and sold as slaves, and owned slaves of their own.[106] Nations like the Creek, Seminole, Cherokee, and Chickasaw often held black slaves before and after the United States imposed its policy

[105] Ibid., 293.

[106]Tiya Miles. *Uncle Tom was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery,* in *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 138

of removal.[107] The Choctaw, who turned to agriculture after their hunting grounds were depleted by white settlers, would often use black slave labor to cultivate their crops. What differs in the practice of slavery amongst Native Americans from that of whites was the relative freedom that many slaves held by Indians enjoyed. The Seminoles, for example allowed their slaves to live as they saw fit, only requiring that they contribute a portion of their crop to their captors each year.[108]

Aside from slavery, the Seminole nation of Florida provides the most well-known instance of black and Indian cooperation, especially in relation to Hoodoo Conjure. It is believed that an escapee slave conjurer named Uncle Monday aided the Seminoles in their wars against the United States in the early nineteenth century. The number of escaped slaves harbored in Seminole territory was so high that the government sought to close off Florida to any more waves of slave migration. After the Seminoles were defeated and forcibly removed from their land, many blacks living in Seminole country accompanied their counterparts to Indian Territory; Uncle Monday, however, did not submit to the United States forces, escaping in the form of an alligator.[109] It was these instances of interracial contact between blacks and Indians that provided ways through which to communicate folk religious traditions.

Like the Christian folk practices of Europeans, the interplay of African folk religious traditions with those of Native Americans was due largely to the similarities that

[107] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society,* 63. Slaves were taken across the country to Indian Territory with their holders upon Indian removal.

[108] Ibid., 63.

[109] Ibid., 63.

exist between them; many Native American religious beliefs are analogous to those of African religions like Vodou. In the southeastern region of America, many Indian nations had concepts of ultimate reality and the universe that ran parallel with those of African peoples. The concept of a supreme creator god detached from the everyday workings of mankind was one common conception, along with the understanding of what is referred to as "levels" of the universe. The Cherokee, for example, see the universe as divided into three levels: The Upper World, This World, and the Under World. The most revered beings lived in the Upper World, human beings in This World and undesirable and fearsome creatures like monsters and ghosts inhabited the Under World.[110] Like the Vodou religion, the balance between energies and elements of the different levels of existence was essential to Native American religions like that of the Cherokee.

African deities also survived in many ways by association with American Indian religious elements. Many Indian groups set aside serpentine creatures as beings with great power; the African snake god Da survived through association with the snake deities of surrounding Indian peoples. Hoodoo Conjurers in Missouri even designated the rattlesnake as particularly powerful, due largely to the prevalence of snakes in Indian tradition.[111] Africans and Native Americans also shared concepts of multiple souls, one bodily and free to leave the body; if the free soul were to abandon a person, only a skilled priest could persuade it back in. This serves as an obvious similarity between the roles of Native American medicine men and African American Conjure

[110] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 64-65.

[111] Ibid., 66.The most obvious example of such a figure is the great serpent of the Under World, called Uktena, in Cherokee tradition.

Doctors.[112] Like the exchange between Africans and Europeans, similarity between Native and African American peoples was not limited to parallels in religious beliefs, but in the direct exchange of ideas and traditions.

Indians and blacks traded and developed methods of magical practice and often shared similar medicinal knowledge of plants and herbs. The amaranth plant was used as an astringent by Indian peoples in Missouri, but among African American Conjurers, it was believed to have the power to make a person fall in love if combined with honey and a dove's heart and eaten. What is referred to as "devil's snuff" in Hoodoo Conjure is powder made from puffball mushrooms used by Indians to stop blood flow and nourish the skin of babies; devil's snuff is a common ingredient in conjure bags prevalent in Georgian Hoodoo Conjure practices.[113] The use of puccoon root was a shared practice amongst both blacks and Indians, as it was believed by both peoples to bring luck if rubbed into the skin.[114] Other elements used in conjuring include red pepper, which was believed by both blacks and Indians to provide protection, and Adam and Eve root, which was believed to bring about love.[115]

In the Sea Islands, off the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia, the tradition of the use of medicinal remedies such as root of a blueberry plant to relieve stomach pains and the Life Everlasting plant to relieve inflammation of the glands was common practice of both African and Native Americans in colonial times and continues in the

[112] Ibid., 67.

[113] Ibid., 71.

[114] Ibid., 72.

[115] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, Table p. 69-70.

islands to the present day.[116] During the nineteenth century the Sea Islands were home to many white men who identified themselves as “Indian doctors,” who learned their medicinal skills from Native Americans.[117] Aside from using mushrooms, plants, herbs and roots in Hoodoo Conjure other items such as stones and crystals were believed to imbibe magical and spiritual power; “conjure stones” are often cited in accounts of people who have encountered Hoodoo, and these stones were almost certainly given to black and white conjurers from their Indian neighbors.[118] Many southeastern Indian peoples believed that certain stones provided one with the ability to see the future, protect them from bullets, bring about favorable weather, and attract members of the opposite sex; the Creek and the Seminole peoples, like the Cherokee, also used magical stones to bring success in areas of love.[119]

The exchange of knowledge concerning spiritual traditions extended to magical traditions as well, manifested in the shared practice of creating magic bundles. In Indian tradition, medicine bundles were often carried for protection, as the bundles were seen as physical representations of one’s guardian spirit. Creek war chiefs often carried medicine bundles into battle and valued them so much that the bundles were never allowed to touch the ground. This tradition is one nearly identical to the beliefs concerning the *gbo* in Vodou tradition, *gerregerys* bags of the West African Mandingo

[116] Faith Mitchell, *Hoodoo Medicine,* 25, 70. Life Everlasting is also used to relieve toothache, to prolong life and to protect one from illness if drunk in a tea.

[117] Ibid, 23.

[118] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 72.

[119] Ibid., 72. Stones were called *sapiya* and were typically used by sorcerers.

people and *minkisi* of the Kongo.[120] Malevolent magical religious practices were shared between blacks and Indians as well; the powers of evil black conjurers were often analogous with those of evil Indian ones. The most common power was the ability to infect the bodies of their victims with insects and reptiles, as well as with inanimate objects like charcoal and cotton; only a more powerful conjurer could remove the infectious entities from the body of the victim.[121] The interplay of traditions and knowledge concerning elements of conjure between blacks and American Indians extended beyond the exchange of ideas; blood lines also became important in many instances of legitimizing one's identity as a Hoodoo Conjurer. Conjurers would attribute their skill to knowledge acquired from studying the art under Indians and other times by asserting their Indian heritage. Marie Laveaux, the famous "Voodoo Queen" of New Orleans, and the powerful conjurer man King Alexander are examples of prominent figures in Hoodoo Conjure with both African and Indian ancestry.[122]

The traditions of people in the American colonies came together through interaction and exchange to become a unique American practice; however its place in American culture is most apparent in the role that Hoodoo Conjure played during the colonial and antebellum eras of slavery. Like any religious practice, Hoodoo Conjure often provided a means of escape and a sense of control in circumstances beyond that of simple notion of it as a system "hexing and healing." The institution of slavery is one that played a vital role in both the growth and the oppression of the practice of Hoodoo

[120] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 28, 68.

[121] Ibid., 68.

[122] Ibid., 64. King Alexander referred to himself as "half Cherokee, half Guinea."

Conjure, and since the period of reconstruction Hoodoo has come out of the shadows as an underlying religious practice in the United States.

CHAPTER 4

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF HOODOO CONJURE

Even as Hoodoo Conjure was growing and changing through the contact between the peoples of America, its existence and practice played a vital role in the development of the cultural and ethnic identities of African Americans living under the oppression of slavery. While the practice of traditional African religions like Vodou largely disappeared during the colonial period, methods of retaining spiritual practices in America were apparent in folk religious traditions like Hoodoo Conjure. While history is often willing only to mention such traditions as forbearers to the conversion of slaves to Christianity, the practice of magical and medicinal “Root Work” and conjure has endured through the span of American history.

While previous chapters have outlined various elements and aspects of Hoodoo Conjure, placing it within a social and cultural framework and a contextual place within the history and culture of America is an essential component in the scope of this paper as well. Hoodoo Conjure, usually referred to in scholarly texts as “folk religious traditions” amongst slave populations, did not exist completely apart from the beliefs of Christianity and was an ever- present element of African American spirituality; its social and cultural importance due largely to the power that conjure men and women often held within the slave community as well the role that Hoodoo Conjure played as a

practice of control and means of comfort within an often hostile environment.[123] Hoodoo Conjurers were often black people who had power over white people during the era of slavery, due not only to their powers of hexing and healing, but due to the fact that they possessed awe- inspiring abilities that their white captors did not have, and could not even comprehend.[124]

Hoodoo Conjure in Slave Culture

The traditional religions of the slaves brought to America were largely stamped out aspects concerning the veneration of the gods and deities of Africa. However, many of the practices of slaves concerning the manipulation of energies to promote balance and harmony remained. One possible reason for the continuing presence of traditional religious practices was the delayed process of converting slaves to Christianity. Slave holders debated over whether to allow their slaves to be converted for centuries due to fears that freedom would be granted to Christian slaves.[125] Religious traditions, like that of Hoodoo Conjure, are often identified as kinds of subversive religious practices eluding the awareness of dominant religions like Christianity.[126] What is interesting to discover in the exploration of the practice of Hoodoo Conjure and the beliefs behind its practice, is that there are many elements of Judeo- Christian tradition involved in it as well. Aside from the use of the Bible and the Cross as elements of protection in many

[123] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 63.

[124] Ibid., 73.

[125] Ibid., 60.

[126] "Folk religious practices" will be used interchangeably with "Hoodoo Conjure" in this particular section, because 1) the mixing of practices and traditions outlined in chapter three were still occurring and 2) the term "Hoodoo " wasn't widely used until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

charms, Moses, Jesus, the devil and even God were all identified as great conjurers, due to their abilities to affect the material world through spiritual means.[127] Given the powerful positions of such figures, the position of the "Hoodoo man or woman" was one on particular importance in the slave community.

Since Hoodoo Conjure is the pragmatic element of African religious tradition that survived in America, it served as vessel through which slaves could assert a certain amount of control over their environment. While there were some accusations of "poisonings" or "fixings" made on the part of white people towards black slaves during the colonial and antebellum periods, the most common instances of malevolency were between the slaves themselves.[128] The issue of power was one most prevalent in the relations between slaves and slave holders in regards to Hoodoo Conjure in particular. One of the most obvious examples of this struggle was the role that Hoodoo Conjure was believed to have played in regards to escaped slaves. Hoodoo Conjurers are cited often in accounts of the experiences of escaped slaves in historical narratives. Conjurers are identified as facilitators in the process of escape for slaves; one example is the commonly held belief that they could "Hoodoo the dogs" hunting for escaped slaves, causing them to stop and bark at trees while the person fled. Other Hoodoo practices in aiding escapees included rubbing graveyard dirt (Goopher Dust) onto the feet or footprints of the slave in order to prevent dogs from catching their scent.[129]

---

[127] Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33. God is seen as the greatest of all conjurers who willed the world into being by assembling the elements necessary for its existence and transforming reality through them.

[128] Pierson, *From Africa to America*, 98.

[129] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 71-72.

Hoodoo Conjurers were also cited as the causes for more lenient punishments handed to a re-captured slave.[130]

Probably the most famous account of an experience of a slave with a Hoodoo Conjurer is the one of the famous abolitionist author and reformer Frederick Douglass. While planning his escape from bondage in Maryland; the root doctor on the plantation named Sandy Jenkins told Douglass of a dream that he had in which he foresaw the failure of their impending escape. Douglass and the other planners did not take his vision seriously, however, and went ahead as planned the men were captured within thirty minutes of their escape.[131] Sandy Jenkins also aided Douglass in an attempt to quell the brutal punishments that Douglass had to endure from a slave driver names Edward Covey, a man who "specialized" in breaking spirited slaves. In 1844 Douglass turned to Jenkins for help to quell the weekly whippings and beatings he was receiving from Covey:

> I found Sandy an old advisor. He was not only a religious man, but he professed to believe in a system for which I have no name. He was a genuine African, and had inherited some of the so-called magical powers…He told me that he could help me, that in those very woods there was an herb which in the morning might be found, possessing the powers required for my protection…. He told me further that if I would take that root and wear it on my right side it would be impossible for Covey to strike me a blow, and that with this root about my person, no white man could whip me.[132]

Douglass' initial reaction was one fairly common among Christian slaves at the time--to dismiss Jenkins' advice as ridiculous and sinful, and beneath his intelligence to adhere

---

[130] Ibid., 71.

[131] Ibid., 67-68.

[132] Ibid., 68-69

to; however, the next morning Douglass did go into the woods to find the root. Facing Covey with the root in his right pocket as Jenkins had advised, Douglass was taken aback when the overseer was so kind in his treatment. When Covey attempted to beat him at a later time, Douglass fought back, and after a two hour fight Covey backed down, never to lay a finger on Douglass again. The root in his pocket is not directly given credit for Douglass" courage in standing up to Covey; however, the unusual element of this particular story is that Covey did not go to the local authorities to have Douglass publicly whipped for assaulting a white man; the root may have been the reason for this unexplainable discrepancy. This particular instance of Hoodoo Conjure would play an important role of what Douglass would go on to cite as the turning- point experience of his life, which led to his freedom.[133]

Nearly every large southern plantation had at least one person who was identified as a conjure doctor or "fortune teller," who was typically held in high esteem and respect by the slave population. These people were turned to for relief and for solutions to problems due to their spiritual authority. [134] Many early Hoodoo Conjurers attributed their abilities to their origins in Africa, but as generations passed, other markers of magical gifts came to be used in identifying those with the power to conjure. Some identifying characteristics included green eyes, albinism, being born with a caul or falling genealogically as the seventh child of a seventh child.[135] Their craft was not seen

[133] Ibid., 69. The root used in this particular charm of protection is never named in Douglass" account of his encounters with Jenkins and Covey; I would speculate that it was probably the root of John the Conqueror, the most famous root charm of Hoodoo Conjure.

[134] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 70.

[135] Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 10, 15. A caul is an amniotic membrane that sometimes covers the face of a newborn; a caul is cited as a marker of magical power in both Europe and amongst Hoodoo Conjurers in America, who often refer to it as a "veil."

as infallible, of course, as many slaves (like Henry Bibb whom we mentioned earlier) dismissed their practices as fruitless. It is interesting to note also that it was a few years *after* Sandy Jenkins gave Frederick Douglass advice on the protector root that Douglass brushed off the warnings of the conjure man concerning their plan to escape.[136]

Belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits is one involved in Hoodoo Conjure and one that persisted during the era of slavery and often reflected the relationships between blacks and whites. Slaves would often decorate the graves of deceased slave-holders; sometimes as a mark of respect or affection, but mostly to prevent any ghostly presence from haunting them.[137] Slaves would often recall instances of slave- holders coming back from the dead in spirit form to continue to torment their former slaves. Slaves would often request to be buried as far away from their masters as possible as a result of this belief.[138] The presence of ghosts was not exclusive to those of white folks of course. There were stories of the ghosts of slaves coming back to punish their former captors as well. John May was a slave beaten to death by two white men and was said to have haunted them both for the rest of their lives. The ghosts of ancestors would often return to advise the living as well to provide aid and protection. As in all aspects of belief behind Hoodoo Conjure, ghosts were both evil and benign spiritual entities.[139]

Aside from the role that the magical religious traditions of slaves played in regards to aiding and abetting escapees, Hoodoo Conjurers were in many ways those

---

[136] Ibid., 67.

[137] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 85.

[138] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 79.

[139] Ibid., 79.

members of the slave community who contended with whites for the position of greatest power in the eyes of the general slave population. This power struggle is demonstrated most evidently in the favor that was often given to slave conjure doctors over white medical practitioners. Many slaves attributed their medicinal skill in herbal healing as inherited from their African-born relatives and as any European and Native American elements were added to African ones, a vast store of remedies were accumulated in helping to alleviate physical distress and illness.[140] One root doctor in Virginia in the eighteenth century called Brother Tom was often requested by white folks to treat their sick slaves, and was entrusted as much, if not more, as any white doctor around.[141]

Women were of particular importance in Hoodoo Conjure during the era of slavery. Conjure women on plantations served as magical practitioners, healers and midwives and were often even feared by men, both white and black. One woman called Old Julie was believed have caused so much mayhem on the plantation that she lived on that the plantation owner finally sold her to another slave holder. Instead of quietly leaving his keep, she conjured the boat carrying her south to travel backwards in the night, returning her to her former captor and forcing him to keep her.[142] Women were, and are still to this day, prevalent and powerful figures within Hoodoo Conjure culture; the most powerful example of is of course, Marie Laveaux of New Orleans.

---

[140] Levine, *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 66.

[141] Ibid., 63.

[142] *Southern Workman*, 26, 37-38 in *Black Culture & Black Consciousness*, 71.

Marie Laveaux & New Orleans Hoodoo

While there has been extensive research and attention paid to New Orleans Voodoo there is also much to be said about the presence of Hoodoo Conjure in the area as well. The term "Voodoo" is used to identify the "religious cult" of New Orleans that adheres to an essentially Americanized form of Haitian Vodou; Hoodoo Conjure has simply been lumped together with it in mainstream understanding. New Orleans Voodoo is essentially separate from Hoodoo Conjure in its existence in forms of group worship and ceremonial practice; Hoodoo Conjure tends to be a more individual endeavor.[143] Voodoo in New Orleans also involves the worship and veneration of African and Haitian deities, while Hoodoo Conjure seeks to influence outside energies to provide personal well being, as well as good or bad luck for other people.[144] New Orleans Hoodoo Conjure, however, differs from that of other regions in that it incorporates some elements of the Catholic undertones present in Voodoo.[145] Zora Neale Hurston once identified New Orleans as the Hoodoo capital of America; the place where great names and rights parallel those of Haiti in keeping the powers of Africa alive.[146]

Marie Laveaux, the famous "Voodoo Queen" of New Orleans in the nineteenth century was famous for her role as a leader within Voodoo and the powers of control that she had, which presumably were the results of her skill in "Hoodooing." Laveaux serves as representation of the power that African American religions had in the

[143] Baer and Singer, *African American Religion*, 233.

[144] Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 55.

[145] Ibid., 85.

[146] Zora Neale. Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935), 193 in *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*, 117.

antebellum south as well as the power of women within those religions. Laveaux is also unique in that fact that she held such power in the Deep South during the era of slavery and the Civil War; something that was nearly impossible for a woman of color elsewhere in the nation. Biographical data about Marie Laveaux is often fragmented and inconsistent; people often disagree as to the exact date of her death, as her daughter (also named Marie Laveaux) in many ways took her place as the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, making identifying which Marie Laveaux mentioned in texts difficult. However, more recent documents have identified her birthday as September 10, 1801 in the late Spanish period of New Orleans prior to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Marie Laveaux's parents, Charles and Marguerite, both had African mothers and French fathers and were devout Catholics; Laveaux was baptized into the faith as a child and identified herself as such throughout her life, while also participating in the rich culture of Voodoo in New Orleans. [147]

Laveaux's power among the community in New Orleans was cemented by both her assertiveness as a leader in Voodoo ceremony and in her use of Hoodoo charms in compassion for the sick, the dying and the imprisoned who often sought her help.[148] Laveaux was said to have performed charms of protection to aid escaped slaves journeying to Canada, and to have provided monetary support for her friends and clients. What is often overlooked is that Laveaux also worked as a nurse at Charity Hospital and is credited for saving the lives of people inflicted with cholera and yellow

[147] Ina Johanna Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 152.

[148] Ibid., 165.

fever through her healing.[149] Laveaux was also said have had the power to appear in more than one place at a time, as well as the ability to control the outcomes of lawsuits and court cases. There were even stories of Laveaux giving orders to politicians, who knew better than to disobey her.

The descriptions of various accounts of the steps that Laveaux took in affecting her community are, of course, examples of methods and common practices among Hoodoo Conjurers. Marie Laveaux is often cited as a figure with a position that comes with respect on the part of the community; Laveaux is sometimes likened to people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in that her position in New Orleans society was not one of elected office, but rather a near-universal respect and veneration.[150] Laveaux was different from other social and historical figures however, in that her power was in many ways based upon fear as well.

As Hoodoo Conjure is always identifiable in terms of both good and evil, many accounts of Laveaux's conjuring practices led to her portrayal as a kind of "bogeyman" figure in nineteenth century New Orleans. It was believed that she practiced cannibalism and child sacrifice, and used her spells and charms to spread disease and break up happy relationships.[151] In fact, the ghost of Marie Laveaux has been consistently spotted in New Orleans since her death on June 15, 1881 due largely to

[149]Ibid., 166. It is not implied that Laveaux's methods of healing were that of a Hoodoo Conjure doctor. Other accounts of her charity suggest that she may have also provided condemned prisoners with potions of euthanasia to spare them the agony of execution as well.

[150] Ibid., 161-170

[151] Ibid., 202-203.

such frightening conceptions of her dealings.[152] New Orleans Hoodoo Conjure is not as distinguishable a system of folk religion like it is in other regions of the South, due to the fact that Voodoo is so prevalent within the culture of the city. Picking out instances of Hoodoo Conjure from "Voodooism" is difficult. However, Hoodoo in New Orleans is in many ways more readily accessible to the general public, due to its place in the culture of the city.[153]

The Transformation of Hoodoo Conjure in Modern Times

Carolyn Morrow Long describes the process of transformation that began to take place in New Orleans after the Civil War in her book *Spiritual Merchants*. Many freed men and people of color began to distance themselves from Voodoo in its most obvious forms, thus pushing it underground into the more pragmatic form of what became to be known as "Hoodoo". Any association with Hoodoo Conjure was often considered degrading, and people began to refer to themselves by different titles like "spiritualists" or "readers" as opposed to "conjurers."[154] Hoodoo Conjure had been present in the south for decades before the turn of the twentieth century of course, but it came to be known by an all- inclusive name during that time.[155] Hoodoo Conjure may have become more mainstream after it was "forced underground" in ways that manifest themselves in the modern day--namely in the existence of spiritual stores and in the commercialization of many elements of Hoodoo Conjure. Long, for example, found spiritual shops across

[152] Ibid., 171. In the years immediately following her death, the sightings may have been due to occasions of mistaken identity; Marie Laveaux had three daughters, all of whom resembled her closely.

[153] Long, Spiritual Merchants, 95.

[154] Ibid., 85.

[155] Ibid., 81.

the Southern United States, in Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina, to name a few. What she also notes is that she also often discovered spiritual shops in record stores, barber shops, gas stations and even one instance of spiritual supplies in a body piercing parlor.[156]

From the dawn of the twentieth century, Hoodoo Conjure has taken on a different role in American society. In many ways, the growth of the commercial aspect of Hoodoo Conjure culture is one that reflects the commercialization of religion in general in modern times. While, historically, Hoodoo Conjurers practiced their craft by serving an exclusive clientele, the spiritual product industry brought products with origins in Hoodoo Conjure into the mainstream. In the modern, post-Civil War period, Hoodoo Conjurers were no longer slaves and no longer confined to life on plantations or farms. Hoodoo Conjurers took on new, modernized identities as healers and readers; many advised people in matters of love, financial endeavors, avoidance of the law, favor in court verdicts, and control over figures like bosses and landlords.[157] The roles of Hoodoo Conjurers changed with American culture and history, while largely serving many of the same functions they did in the era of slavery during the colonial and antebellum periods.

While traditional Hoodoo Conjurers prepare baths and washes, powders, fumigants, items to be ingested, and charms of protection called “shields” and “guards” themselves, in more recent times, manufacturing of these items has taken place on a

[156] Ibid, 96.

[157] Baer and Singer, *African American Religion*, 237.

much larger scale.[158] Carolyn Morrow Long identifies this shift in the method of practice in Hoodoo Conjure as an occurrence similar to that of American culture overall; people rarely churn their own butter or sew their own clothes anymore, and acquiring religious supplies is no exception to the growing dependence of Americans upon industrially manufactured products. Thus by the 1930s, anything that a Hoodoo Conjurer would need for a particular charm or remedy could be found at a spiritual store.[159] Over time, spiritual stores selling products used for conjuring expanded beyond New Orleans and were established all over the country and, in most recent years, has even expanded to the marketing of spiritual products on the world wide web.[160] Spiritual stores are not exclusively novelty stores; many take the form of drugstores and pharmacies. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many forms of naturopathy came into the mainstream of medicinal practice. Often medical practitioners would employ the use of "botanicals" in methods of treatment; thus, Hoodoo drugstores came into existence as ways to facilitate the needs of both conjure doctors and those seeking natural methods of treatment.[161]

Hoodoo Conjurers in the modern age are religious practitioners and healers, but are also, in many instances business people as well. Many stores exist in the United States that sell products and ingredients for Hoodoo Conjure, often owned by Conjurers

---

[158] Ibid., 82.

[159]Ibid., 99-100. Examples of products in these stores includes pre-bottled graveyard dirt, roots, bones and other animal parts, lodestones, powders, oils and candles; such items could also be obtained through mail order.

[160] Ibid.,129. It is important to note, however, that spiritual products are almost always sold under the premise that they are "novelty" products only, in order to avoid lawsuits concerning mail fraud. Mail fraud often served as a means through which many persecuted Hoodoo Conjure.

[161]Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 100, 143. Hoodoo drugstores and spiritual shops are not owned exclusively by blacks, but by people of all races and all backgrounds.

themselves. Aside from their roles as business owners, many Hoodoo Conjurers are formidable figures within their communities; the most powerful example of this continuing importance into the modern age was a man named Doctor Jim Jordan, from North Carolina.

Doctor Jordan was born in 1871, the son of former slaves, he learned Native American herbalism and healing from his mother (who was of African and Indian descent), and conjuring skill from his Uncle.[162] Doctor Jordan ran a successful Hoodoo store adjacent to the general store that he owned in Manley's Neck Township, which opened in 1927. His practice was so successful that he drew clientele from as far away as New York and Washington D.C. They often paid thousands of dollars for his remedies and arrived on chartered buses. Doctor Jordan was an esteemed member of his community, often accepting payment for his services in forms of food and services. Doctor Jordan was a member of the local Baptist Church and was held in great respect by local police medical doctors and business men. [163] Doctor Jordan died in 1962, after practicing as a licensed doctor and spiritual advisor for years. His methods in practicing Hoodoo Conjure reflect the development of the practice; while initially drawing ingredients for his charms and remedies from the surrounding forests, he later began to order them from supply houses.[164]

Practitioners in the Southeastern United States serve as instances of the adaptation and survival of Hoodoo Conjure, and in some ways, the growing acceptance

[162] Ibid, 94. See also *The Fabled Doctor Jim Jordan* by F. Roy Johnson.

[163] Ibid., 94.

[164] Ibid., 94.

of it in American life. Along with Doctor Jordan, Sara Murphy of North Carolina, Fred Moore of Georgia, Oscar Gilchrist of South Carolina are modern examples of Hoodoo Conjures and practitioners in the United States.[165] Murphy provides help for those inflicted with aliments or jinxes, while Gilchrist is known as the "Bone Man" of Nichols, Georgia who provides services in healing and advising.[166]

Hoodoo Conjure in its modern incarnation is still not as mainstream as religious traditions like Christianity and Islam, but it operates on a much larger scale than it did in the past. The evolution of the practice of Hoodoo Conjure is a reflection of the practice of folk religious traditions in the United States. The new attitudes of American culture, in many ways are eager to embrace certain ideas that seem to go against the grain of established religions. While it would be a mistake to identify Hoodoo Conjure as a "new age" practice, since it has been present in American culture for centuries, interest in conjure culture has in many ways arisen due to interest within the New Age movement.[167] Hoodoo Conjure has, however, played an integral role in the development of the cultural identities of African Americans, as well as Americans in general. After the Civil War and the implementation of Jim Crow laws in the south, black folks turned away from white models of identity; thus Hoodoo Conjure became a major means through which to identify oneself as an American due to its rich historic and

[165] Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 96.

[166] Ibid, 96.

[167] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 18-19.

religious tradition. Hoodoo Conjure has also played a historic role in shaping the identity of the American south as distinctly American in its culture and tradition. [168]

Hoodoo Conjure, like all the religious traditions in the United States has adapted to the events of its history, and the ever- changing relations between the people who live within its borders. It points to the underlying adaptability of any religious tradition to survive, at least in some form, in a place very different from that in which it was born. The reliance on holy writings is one that would have surely killed off the folk religious traditions of the peoples of Europe, Africa and America before they ever had the chance to interact in forming an American folk religion. It is Hoodoo Conjure that serves as an example of the very real possibility that the life of a religious practice is not due to dogma or doctrine but to its practitioners-- their histories, their cultures, and their lives.

[168] Ibid., 10-11.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The underlying similarities present in the traditional and folk religious realm is one that points to the common phenomena that is *religion*. There is often a rush to generalize about traditions that are seemingly synonymous. The old clichés of identifying the “primitive” religious traditions along lines of common elements like ancestor worship, diffused monotheism and so on is disrespectful to both the people that it pigeon- holds and the idea that religions exists in levels of sophistication. The folk religious traditions of the people of the world have underlying similarities, in practice as well as worldview, but they are not the *same*. What sets folk religious traditions, like Hoodoo Conjure, apart from scripturally- based traditions is their ability to adapt and change to whatever environment they are in, hostile or otherwise. Folk religious traditions are those that have their roots in established theological and cosmological ideas, but are unique to their locations in the world, often from nation to nation as well as region to region.

There has existed a very famous debate over the years in the scholarly world-- one that asserts or denies the survival of the traditional African religions brought to America through the slave trade. This debate had arisen due largely to the history of slavery in the United States and the role that it has played in both sustaining and

destroying certain traditions. While the institution of slavery was one that largely shaped American culture, it is also important due to the part that it played in bringing together the traditions of the peoples of the world into one place. The evils of slavery cannot be denied, but it is possible to say that if it had never existed, Hoodoo Conjure may never have developed and taken its place as an American folk religious practice. However, since religious beliefs are those inseparable from culture in many traditions, the issue of acculturation within African American society, and American society as a whole, is one prevalent in the study of American history and culture. The argument present within the scope of identifying elements in present culture that existed before their introduction to the American continent is one that scholars have grappled over for years. Some thinkers support the idea that elements of religious traditions, like those of Africa, have transformed within American culture; others argue that slavery completely stamped out said traditions due to the loss of freedom of identity, as well as religion, under slavery. The two most famous of these thinkers are Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier.

The Argument Concerning Religious and Cultural Retentions

In the section of his work *Slave Religion, The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* called "Death of the Gods," Albert Raboteau outlines the debate that exists between scholars over the history of traditional African religions in America, citing two specific scholars as example; anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, asserting that traditions, in fact, were not destroyed in North America and perpetuate in many forms to the present day, and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, arguing that the process of

enslavement oppressed and eradicated the traditions of the slaves.[169] While both scholars provide example and evidence to support their claims, Raboteau is correct in pointing out that proof for either side of such an argument is non- existent, and that one must be sure to avoid making overgeneralizations in such a dichotomous debate.[170] The problem with attempting to choose sides in this particular scholarly paradox is in the supposed one-way interaction that is often seen as occurring between African slaves and white European slave holders; African slaves were not only influenced by the culture and religion of their white captors, but influenced white culture and religion themselves.[171] Traditional African religious practices like the ones that would come to be known as Hoodoo Conjure became American religion, in that their transformation under slavery was not merely an issue of acculturation, but one of interaction. Hoodoo Conjure serves as the most obvious example of the interaction of beliefs between the peoples of the New World: the ones who brought beliefs and practices with them from places around the globe, and the people of America who contributed their own culture and beliefs to aid in forming an essentially American practice.[172]

Since the onset of scholarly debate over Old World retentions, many scholars have adopted positions that are not as polarized as those of Herskovits and Frazier. Lawrence Levine writes in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* that culture is more than the sum of its parts, such as language and institutions, but a shared sense of

[169] Raboteau, *Slave Religion, 48*-52.

[170] Ibid , 55.

[171] Ibid., 58. The relationships between these two groups almost always excludes any mention of Native American influence (in regards to both groups), and it a reflection of the “black and white” attitudes often present in scholasticism.

[172] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 73.

humanity and its place within the world.[173] The terminology used to describe African contributions to American society such as “survivals” or “retentions” is degrading to their importance and implies that their place within society is one that simply serves to remind people that African Americans are “picturesquely different” but the causes for those differences have been lost.[174] I agree with Levine in his assertion that culture is not a static mode of existence but a process, one that is ever changing and in many ways an ongoing relationship between the past and the present. [175] Hoodoo Conjure serves to validate this position, due to the fact that it is a tradition owing its elements of practice to peoples of African, European and Native descent, and one that does not owe allegiance to any concrete and unchanging sets of dogma but rather to the people who practice it.

Along with Lawrence Levine, other scholars such as Jeffrey Anderson propose the commonality of American religion and religious folk traditions, like Hoodoo Conjure , is their endeavor to reconcile African (and I would also say European) heritage with the process of developing an American culture and identity.[176] This endeavor is prevalent among the mainstream monotheistic religions in the United States as well. Catholics and Jews have struggled for centuries to identify and validate their positions as members of their faiths far from their places of origin like Rome and Israel. American peoples have always been confronted with the issue of identity formation due to the fact

[173] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 4.

[174] Ibid., 4.

[175] Ibid., 5.

[176] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 73.

that (with the exception of Native Americans, of course) the peoples of America can draw their lineage to other places in the world. Americans are unique in that they are citizens of one nation who still attribute many of their cultural and religious practices to others. The African American community is certainly no exception, but the institution of slavery is one that often singles out the particular cultural contributions that have endured in spite of it; the traditions of Europeans were brought to America willingly and were not consistently oppressed by other groups, the traditions of Africa were.[177]

Hoodoo Conjure & Folk Religious Practices as "World Religion"

There has been study into the role that conjure culture has played and continued to play within African American and American history, culture, and identity. I would however, take a step further to say that folk religious traditions, traditions that are rooted in inherited beliefs and practices and actively seek to manipulate the energies of the world for protection or personal gain, are the religious convictions common to the people of the world as well. Aside from the often-held notion that folk religious practices are common only among people who are "superstitious," elements of folk religious practices are present in nearly every religion of the world. Hoodoo Conjure in particular brings many of these elements together in an American incarnation, making in a synthesized religious system that may validate the vision many people have of America as the great "melting pot" of the world; Hoodoo Conjure serves as an example of the great melting pot of religion.

Folk religious practices may be defined also as those which take more active roles in the happenstance of human experience than those of "established" dogmatic

[177] Ibid., 150.

religions. The traditions of Africa are particular examples of the importance of practice apart from doctrine. Nigerian scholar Mbonu Ojike writes in *My Africa*,

> If religion consists in deifying one character and crusading around the world to make him acceptable to all mankind, then the African has no religion. But if religion means doing, rather than talking then the African has a religion.[178]

This sentiment may apply to other religious traditions of the world as well; aside from the fact that the religious actions taken on the part of many folk religious practitioners are based in the established religious doctrines of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and the religions of the east like Shinto, the element of action is the same. Folk religious practitioners do not place all of the power to affect their lives in the benevolence of God, but rather take the responsibility of maintaining the balance necessary to foster harmony in their lives and those of others.

In Islam, for example, there is an element of folk religious practice that is incredibly similar, if not identical to the practices and elements of Hoodoo Conjure . In Afghanistan, a group of people called the Pashtun compose the ethnic majority of the Taliban. They combine Islamic beliefs with traditional folk traditions; many Pashtun women wear charms of protection against evil spells and curses.[179] Muslims in Eastern Chad and Western Sudan called the Baggara often carry leather pouches containing verses of the Qur'an for protection, which is analogous to the European tradition of

---

[178] Mbono Ojike, *My Africa*, 181, in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, 69.

[179] Kjos, Andy and Berit. *Four Faces of Islam*. http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/Islam.htm. This practice has been attributed to the fact that gender stratification in parts of Afghanistan often forbids women from attending Mosque; I would say it is a common element of religion.

carrying verses of the Christian Bible mentioned earlier.[180] The repetition of the *shahadah* several times a day is also believed to have the power of warding off evil *jinn* and protect the believer from the malevolence of the evil eye.[181]

Many of the modern mail- order companies that provide ingredients for Hoodoo Conjure rituals also provide copies of books like *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, which describe the folk religious practices present in Jewish Kabbalah. The proper invocation of God, as well as angels and demons, is believed to provide the practitioner with the means to do their will.[182] Chinese folk religion is probably the most widely practiced form of folk religion, with its practitioners believing in many of the same principles that govern folk religions like Hoodoo Conjure. The three major relationships of man and nature, person and person (living and deceased) and life and afterlife, are functions of retaining the balance harmony of the world's energies.[183] This is of course, a typical aim of the folk religions of the world, including the folk religion of America that is Hoodoo Conjure.

Folk religious traditions like that of Hoodoo Conjure in the United States are synonymous with American culture. While all the people of America that are not of native descent carry with them traditions and practices from other parts of the globe, it is Hoodoo Conjure that serves to exemplify the oneness of American folk religious

---

[180] Ibid.,

[181] Gailyn Van Rheenen. *Introduction to Folk Religion.* http://www.missiology.org/folkreligion/introduction.htm. The *shahadah* is the Islamic confession of faith; "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."

[182] Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 121.

[183] *A Brief Look at Chinese Folk Religion.* FCCJ Library. http://www.fccj.edu/library/chi-reli/chi-reli.htm.

traditions, those that are inseparable from culture, as culture is inseparable from the people who are a part of it. Author Henry Mitchell writes in *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa*, that culture (and I would add the religion within it) can never be eradicated as long as even a handful of people remain to perpetuate its elements and that aiming to destroy a certain religion or tradition will only force it underground.[184]

Hoodoo Conjure serves to prove his point, as it has been persecuted and misunderstood by both blacks and whites for the span of American history. Hoodoo Conjure does not fall along the same lines as doctrinal or scriptural religions in that it is practiced in an individualistic fashion in order to tip the balances of energies in both malevolent and benevolent fashions. The paradox present in describing Hoodoo Conjure as a religious system of belief lies in the absence of adherence to any uniform system of dogma or ceremony. Religion is usually understood as system of relationships between people and the divine, as well as an overarching moral code to which a believer adheres.

I would say that the understanding of religion should be expanded to include an understanding of the ways in which it influences the relationships between human beings. Hoodoo Conjure serves as means through which people relate to one another, through hexing and through healing, and does not ignore human emotion and passion. Religion is, in my opinion, a phenomena that provides one with a sense of security, a sense of comfort and sense of purpose; all of which are present in the practice of

[184] Henry Mitchell, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa, 37* in *Practical Theology for Black Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 15.

Hoodoo Conjure; it also testifies to the adaptability of religion in spite of the tensions that religious differences often cause between peoples. The history of the United States, in all of its beauty and horror, provides one with an example of how traditions and ideas are communicated in spite of nearly every conceivable obstacle hindering their exchange. Joseph Epes Brown writes in *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* that "the truest bearer of culture is one who is religiously human within the context of a traditional heritage."[185] Humanity is essential to the understanding of any religion; Hoodoo Conjure, in its rich tradition of both magical and medicinal practices, and its adaptation and growth within American culture provides an exemplar of American folk religious tradition as well as a tradition of the world.

[185] Joseph Epes Brown. *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), 123.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrews, Dale P. Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Jeffrey Anderson E. Conjure in African American Society. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

Baer, Hans A. and Merrill Singer. African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation, Second Edition. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002.

Bodin, Ron. Voodoo Past and Present. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1990.

Breslaw, Elaine G. ed. Witches of the Atlantic World: A Historical Reader & Primary Source Book. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Brooks, James F, ed. Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Brown, Joseph Epes. The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995.

Carmody, Denise L. and John T. Carmody. Native American Religions: An Introduction. New York: Paulist Press, 1993.

Chiang, Arthur Yaopo. *A Brief Look at Chinese Folk Religion.* FCCJ Library.

http://www.fccj.edu/library/chi-reli/chi-reli.htm

Davis, Rod. American Voudou: Journey into a Hidden World. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998.

Desmangles, Leslie G. The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Fandrich, Ina Johanna. The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux. A study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth Century New Orleans. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Gill, Sam. Native American Religious Action: The Performance Approach to Religion. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.

Hurbon, Laennec. Voodoo: Search for Spirit. Translated by Lory Frankel. New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, Inc., 1995.

Kessler, Gary E. Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases. New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 2006.

Kjos, Andy and Berit. *Four Faces of Islam*. http://www.crossroad.to/articles2/Islam.htm

Laguerre, Michel S. Voodoo Heritage. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications Inc., 1980.

Levine, Lawrence W. Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Thought from Slavery to Freedom. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Long, Carolyn Morrow. Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001.

Mami Wata*. "West African & Diaspora Vodou."* http://www.mamiwata.com.

Metraux, Alfred. Voodoo in Haiti. London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son Ltd., 1959.

Michel, Claudine & Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, eds. Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006.

Miles, Tiya & Saron P. Holland, eds. Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Minges, Patrick, ed. Black Indian Slave Narratives. Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Pub., 2004.

Mitchell, Faith. Hoodoo Medicine. Gullah Herbal Remedies. Columbia: Summerhouse Press, 1999.

Murphy, Joseph M. Working the Spirit. Ceremonies of the African Diaspora. Boston: Beacon press, 1994.

Murray, David. Matter, Magic and Spirit. Representing Indian and African American Belief. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

Nash, Gary B. Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974.

Niezen, Ronald. Spirit Wars: Native North American Religions in the Age of Nation Building. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Olupona, Jacob K. and Sulayman S. Nyang, eds. Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993.

Parrinder, Geoffrey. African Traditional Religion. London: Sheldon Press, 1962.

Piersen, William D. From Africa to America. African American History from the Colonial Era to the Early Republic, 1526-1790. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

Pinn, Anthony B. Varieties of African American Religious Experience. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998.

Puckett, Newbell Niles. Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926.

Raboteau, Albert J. Canaan Island: A Religious History of African Americans. Oxford University Press: New York, 1999, 2001.

Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Reiss, Oscar. Blacks in Colonial America. London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997.

Rosenthal, Judy. Possession, Ecstasy and Law in Ewe Voodoo. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998.

Runeberg, Arne. Witches, Demons and Fertility Magic. Norwood Editions, 1974.

Sernett, Milton C. ed. African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Simpson, George Eaton. Black Religions in the New World. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

Simpson, George Eaton. Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica and Haiti. Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies University of Puerto Rico, 1980.

Smith, Theophus H. Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Thomas, Douglas E. African Traditional Religion in the Modern World. London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005.

Thomas, Keith. Religion and the Decline of Magic. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.

Thompson, Robert Farris. Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy. New York: Random House Publishers, 1993.

Van Rheenen, Gailyn. *Introduction to Folk religion.* http://www.missiology.org/folkreligion/introduction.htm

Vodun (and Related Religions). http://www.religioustolerance.org/voodoo. htm.

Voodoo in the United States. http://studentweb.tulane.edu/~lzee/novoodoo. htm.