

Hoodoo (folk magic)

Hoodoo, also known as **conjure**, and "Voodoo" (which strictly speaking is different in many ways) is a traditional African-American folk spirituality that developed from a number of West African, Native American, and European spiritual traditions.

Roots of Hoodoo

Hoodoo has some spiritual principles and practices similar to spiritual folkways in Haitian, Cuban, Jamaican, and New Orleans traditions. Hoodoo seems to have evolved in the Mississippi Delta where the concentration of slaves had been dense. Hoodoo then spread throughout the Southeast as well as North along the Mississippi as African Americans left the Delta beginning in the 1930s.

There is strong mainstream American prejudice against Hoodoo, based on the myths that hoodoo is practiced primarily with selfish, hurtful intentions, or that it is related to worship of the Christian devil, Satan Hoodoo is sometimes thought of as "folk magic" or "superstition". These terms tend to perpetuate the misperception that Hoodoo is a childlike belief in tricks The efficacy of hoodoo as a spiritual influence on outcomes in the physical and social world is comparable to that of mainstream religious rituals.

Spiritual folkways like hoodoo are an ever-evolving process, continuously synthesizing from contact with other cultures, religions and folkways. What is striking about the hoodoo folk process is the use of biblical figures in its practices and in the lives of its practitioners.^[1] In fact, most practitioners of Hoodoo integrate this folkway with their Christian religious faith. Icons of Christian saints are often found on hoodoo shrines or altars.

The word *hoodoo* first was documented in American English in 1875 and was classified as a noun (the practice of hoodoo) or a transitive verb: "I hoodoo you"... with a potion that causes healing, a parapsychological power, or some harm. In African American Vernacular English (AAVE), hoodoo is often used to describe a paranormal consciousness or spiritual hypnosis, a "spell". But hoodoo may also be used as an adjective for a practitioner, such as hoodoo man.

Regional synonyms for hoodoo include *conjuraton*, *conjure*, *witchcraft*, or *rootwork*.^[4] Older sources from the 18th and 19th century sometimes use the word Obeah to describe equivalent folk practices.^[5]

The Hoodoo Conceptual System

Western and Central African slaves brought their traditional spiritual concepts and their cultural practices to North America and the Caribbean. According to Carolyn Morrow Long, "At the time of the slave trade, the traditional nature-centered religions of West and Central Africa were

characterized by the concept that human well-being is governed by spiritual balance, by devotion to a supreme creator and a pantheon of lesser deities, by veneration and propitiation of the ancestors, and by the use of charms to embody spiritual power. [...] In traditional West African thought, the goal of all human endeavor was to achieve balance." Several African spiritual traditions recognized a genderless supreme being who created the world, was neither good nor evil, and which did not concern itself with the affairs of mankind. Lesser spirits were invoked to gain aid for humanity's problems.^[6]

Since the 19th century there has been Christian influence in hoodoo thought,^[7] usually of an Old Testament strain. This is particularly evident in relation to God's providence and his role in retributive justice. For example, though there are strong ideas of good versus evil, cursing someone to cause their death might not be considered a malignant act. For example, one practitioner explained it as follows:

"[In] Hoodooism, anythin' da' chew do is de plan of God undastan', God have somepin to do wit evah' thin' you do if it's good or bad, He's got somepin to do wit it . . . jis what's fo' you, you'll git it."^[8]

"([In] Hoodooism, anything that you do is the plan of God, God has something to do with everything that you do whether it's good or bad, he's got something to do with it... You'll get what's coming to you)"

Not only is God's providence a factor in hoodoo practice, but hoodoo thought understands God as the archetypal hoodoo doctor. On this matter Zora Hurston stated, "The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made."^[9] From this perspective, biblical figures are often recast as hoodoo doctors and the Bible becomes a source of conjurational spells and is, itself, used as a protective talisman.^[10]

Moses-as-conjurer

Paralleling *God-as-conjurer*, hoodoo practitioners often understand the biblical figure Moses in similar terms. Hurston developed this idea in her novel *Moses: Man of the Mountain*, in which she calls Moses, "the finest hoodoo man in the world."^[11] Obvious parallels between Moses and intentional paranormal influence (such as magic) occur in the biblical accounts of his confrontation with Pharaoh. Moses conjures, or performs magic "miracles" such as turning his staff into a snake. However, his greatest feat of conjure was using his powers to help free the Hebrews from slavery. This emphasis on Moses-as-conjurer led to the introduction of the pseudonymous work the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* into the corpus of hoodoo reference literature.^[12]

Bible-as-talisman

In hoodoo, "All hold that the Bible is the great conjure book in the world."^[13] It has many functions for the practitioner, not the least of which is a source of spells. This is particularly

evident given the importance of the book *Secrets of the Psalms* in hoodoo culture.^[14] This book provides instruction for using psalms for things such as safe travel, headache, and marital relations. The Bible, however, is not just a source of spells but is itself a conjuring talisman. It can be taken "to the crossroads," carried for protection, or even left open at specific pages while facing specific directions. This informant provides an example of both uses:

"Whenevah ah'm afraid of someone doin' me harm ah read the 37 Psalms an' co'se ah leaves the Bible open with the head of it turned to the east as many as three days."^[15]

Practices

The purpose of hoodoo is to allow people access to supernatural forces to improve their daily lives. Hoodoo helps people attain power or success ("luck") in many areas of life including money, love, divination, revenge, health, employment, and necromancy. As in many other spiritual and medical folk practices, extensive use is made of herbs, minerals, parts of animals' bodies, an individual's possessions and bodily fluids, especially menstrual blood, urine, saliva, and semen.

Contact with ancestors or other spirits of the dead is an important practice within the conjure tradition, and the recitation of Psalms from the Bible is also considered spiritually influential in hoodoo. Due to hoodoo's great emphasis on an individual's spiritual power to effect desired change in the course of events, hoodoo's principles are believed to be accessible for use by any individual of faith. Hoodoo practice does not require a formally designated minister.

Home-made potions and charms form the basis of much rural hoodoo, but there are also some successful commercial companies selling various hoodoo products to urban and town practitioners. These are generally called spiritual supplies, and they include herbs, roots, minerals, candles, incense, oils, glitter, floor washes, sachet powders, bath crystals, icons, aerosols, and colognes. Many patent medicines, cosmetics, and household cleaning supplies for mainstream consumers have been aimed also at hoodoo practitioners. Some products have dual usage as conventional and spiritual supplies, examples of which include the Four Thieves Vinegar,^[16] Florida Water,^[17] and Red Devil Lye.^[18]

Cultural influences

Traditionally, religions and spiritual folkways around the world have freely borrowed practices and beliefs from each other. In this regard, hoodoo is no different. Thus, it is difficult to establish the regional/cultural origins of many practices. For example, the use of an effigy, often called a "voodoo doll" in popular culture, to perform a spell on someone is documented in African, Native American, and European cultures.^{[19][20]}

Europe

Europe's greatest identifiable influence on hoodoo is the presence and use of European or

European-American grimoires. One of the first examples of this is John George Hohman's *Pow-wows: or, Long Lost Friend*, a collection of magical spells originally published in 1820 for Pennsylvania-Dutch Hexemeisters.^[21] Pow-wows was introduced to hoodoo through catalogs on magic geared toward the African-American community in the early 20th century.^[citation needed] The spells in this book are woven throughout with Christian symbolism and prayer, which made it a natural addition to the similar symbolism of hoodoo. Mirroring the hoodoo concept of the *Bible-as-talisman*, the book itself proposes to be a protective amulet: "Whoever carries this book with him is safe from all his enemies, visible or invisible; and whoever has this book with him cannot die without the holy corpse of Jesus Christ, nor drown in any water, nor burn up in any fire, nor can any unjust sentence be passed upon him. So help me."^[22]

The *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* is a European grimoire that is purportedly based on Jewish Kabbalah, though it actually covers little, if any, Kabbalistic thought. It contains numerous signs, seals, and passages in Hebrew that are supposed to be related to Moses' ability to work wonders. Though its authorship is attributed to Moses, the oldest manuscript dates to the mid-19th century. Its importance in hoodoo practice is summarized as follows:

"I read de "Seven Books of Moses" seven or eight yeah a'ready ... de foundation of hoodooism came from way back yondah de time dat Moses written de book "De Seven Book of Moses."^[23]

Differences between Voodoo and Hoodoo

Like Voodoo, Hoodoo shows evident links to the practices and beliefs of West African spiritual folkways. The ancient African folkway of Vodun is a more standardized and widely dispersed spiritual practice than hoodoo. Vodun's modern form is practiced across West Africa in the countries now known as Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso, among others. In Haiti, Cuba, and other Caribbean islands, the worship of the Vodoun gods (called *lwa* or *loas*) is practiced in a syncretic form that has been greatly modified by contact with Catholicism. The Voodoo of Haiti and Louisiana Voodoo are related more to Vodun than to Hoodoo; similar Vodun practices among Spanish speakers in Cuba are called Santería.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoodoo_\(folk_magic\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoodoo_(folk_magic))