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Hex Workers: African American Women, Hoodoo, and Power in the Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century U.S.

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My interest in women and “the hidden” led me to a study of women and the occult. This paper focuses primarily on African American women and their use of hoodoo to gain social and economic power in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is my contention that, as the importance of scientific and technical knowledge increased during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such knowledge was largely reserved for and associated in the popular mind with white males. Command of more traditional sources of knowledge and power (e.g., folk magic) was increasingly relegated to and associated with women and people of color, especially African Americans. Knowledge of hoodoo fell within this category.¹ African American women and women of mixed European and African heritage were thought to be particularly knowledgeable regarding the occult and especially adept at the use of spells and charms. Ironically, although command of this lore led to women and people of color being labeled as “backward,” “ignorant,” and “superstitious” by educated white men, their occult knowledge gave them the ability to manipulate the social world and improve their status within it.

It is important to distinguish between voodoo and hoodoo. Voodoo [or Vodun] is a religion practiced largely (although not exclusively) by people of African descent in the Caribbean and in the United States. The religion focuses on placing devotees at the service of the spirits—spirits that are derived from and bear a close kinship to gods worshiped by peoples in West Africa and the Congo. During rituals that revolve around rhythms and dances sacred to various gods, the spirits take possession of their devotees (often called “riding”) and make their will known through them. In return, the spirits protect their devotees and provide assistance for them in their lives. Hoodoo is a form of folk magic and is not associated with any particular religion or set of religious beliefs. Its practitioners use powders and potions derived from natural materials, spells, and charms to aid those who seek out their help. This help might take the form of healing the sick; protecting people from their enemies; wreaking vengeance on those who have harmed others; or attracting luck, love, and economic prosperity. Although hoodoo makes use of African charms, rituals, and forms of divination, it also borrows heavily from Native American traditions and European folk magic. Indeed, the famous “voodoo doll,” an image of one’s enemy run through with pins, is more rooted in European traditions of manipulating dolls or wax figures to harm one’s enemies than in traditional African practices.² Despite the difference between the two practices, however, many white Americans (and some African Americans as well) confused the two practices (and continue to do so), and practitioners of hoodoo were commonly referred to as both “hoodoos” and “voodooos.” Thus, while this study will focus on hoodoo, quotations from primary source materials will often make use of the word “voodoo” to describe beliefs and practices that can more correctly be described as “hoodoo.”

Although belief in the power of hoodoo was common among white Americans in the nineteenth century, it was strongest among African Americans. African American attachment to hoodoo was reinforced not only by cultural traditions brought from Africa and the Caribbean but also by the realities of African American life both before and after slavery. Hard physical labor, inadequate clothing and shelter, and a poor diet caused African Americans to suffer from numerous physical ailments. African Americans’ position as chattel left them vulnerable to separation from parents, spouses, and children and subject to harsh physical discipline, confinement, abuse, and loss of life. These factors along with the inability to control the most basic aspects of one’s life—where one lived, the nature of one’s work, and the types of people one associated with on a daily basis—took an enormous psychological toll. Faced with such difficulties, enslaved African Americans turned to hoodoo to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of life and to alleviate their suffering.

¹ See Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 145-46.

² Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33-34, 36-37.

Following the end of slavery, African Americans continued to resort to these sources of aid, for, despite their being legally free, they were still subject to poor living and working conditions, physical abuse at the hands of whites, imprisonment, and separation from loved ones.³ Many Americans, both white and black, observed and reported the persistence of hoodoo beliefs; some did so even as they simultaneously claimed that many African American beliefs, superstitions, and rituals were dying out.⁴

At the most basic level, hoodoo women (also known as conjure women, root workers, and root doctors) were sought out to provide cures for the numerous physical ailments from which African Americans suffered as a result of harsh living and working conditions. Physical ailments could often be effectively treated with herbal remedies created by women who had extensive knowledge of plants. Voodoo practitioners were thought to be particularly well versed in botanical lore and were believed to be especially skilled in the use of poisonous plants. "Voodoo Queens," one white writer proclaimed, "know far more [about dangerous plants] than many modern botanists."⁵ Many illnesses and physical debilities were undoubtedly psychosomatic in origin, caused by the stress of living in grinding poverty, often afraid for one's life or of being separated from one's family. Cures for these types of illnesses might be effected through the administration of herbal powders and potions or therapeutic baths; quite often charms and spells were used to treat such ailments. Some nineteenth-century writers claimed that hoodoos possessed the ability to hypnotize people and believed that this was how they worked their miraculous cures.⁶

Regardless of the nature of the treatment, the remedies doled out by hoodoos were reported to have healed both adults and children of the most frightening of ailments, and both African Americans and whites often attested to the power of these healers. Sallie M. Park, a white slave owner, for example, reported a miraculous cure worked by a hoodoo woman upon a young female slave, whose illness was thought to have been caused by a spell cast upon her by another woman. Before the arrival of the hoodoo woman, the young woman had taken to bed. Believing that another slave was poisoning her food, she had refrained from eating for some time, and her parents feared that she was close to death.⁷ Upon the hoodoo woman's arrival, the cause of the young woman's ailment was quickly discerned: another slave had placed a malevolent charm beneath the floor of the young woman's cabin. The charm was found, and the afflicted woman began to recover.⁸

Another common task of hoodoos was to create charms that would attract good luck and ensure economic prosperity. In this category fell the popular task of providing clients with numbers with which to play the lottery or the "Policy." This was often accomplished through the interpretation of a client's dreams.⁹ For those who sought success in gambling or some other aspect of life, hoodoo women might concoct "mojo hands," small sacks containing feathers, teeth, roots, and other objects thought to bring luck. Some hoodoos, like Aunt Caroline Dye of Arkansas, were considered particularly adept in their use of mojos, and such women were often immortalized in blues songs.¹⁰ Although mojo hands promised luck in general, some people sought the assistance of hoodoo women in achieving more prosaic and humble goals. For example, a blues song, "Hoodoo

³ Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 229-31, 240-43, 277-79, 412-13, 419.

⁴ *New York Times*, "Worshippers of the Voodoo," June 25, 1891; James McClean, "Voodoo at the Vanishing Point in Old New Orleans," *Sedalia (MO) Democrat*, September 26, 1949. Well into the twentieth century people were still (erroneously) reporting the disappearance of voodoo and hoodoo practices.

⁵ "Worshippers of the Voodoo."

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ [Sallie M. Park], "Voodooism in Tennessee," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1889, 376.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 379-80.

⁹ Fabian, *Card Sharps*, 8-9, 145.

¹⁰ Jennie Mae Clayton, *Aunt Caroline Dyer Blues*, The Memphis Jug Band with Will Shade, Victor 23347, 45 rpm, 1930. In the song, Shade mispronounces the name of Aunt Caroline Dye.

Lady," sung by Memphis Minnie, expressed the singer's wish that the eponymous hoodoo woman would work a charm that would bring the singer money to pay her overdue rent, or, at the very least, cast a spell that would enable Minnie "to unlock my door so I can get in and get all my clothes."¹¹

Men and women also hired hoodoos to concoct love. These charms were said to have the ability to attract the object of one's desire, to reunite separated lovers, to reignite cooled passions, or to make an unfaithful lover return. "Nothing," nineteenth-century African American Spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph attested, "is more common than for both men and women to employ the VOUDEAUX to effect contact with loved or desired ones....A man loves a woman and can not reach her, or vice versa; then comes in the voud."¹² Although such charms were purchased by whites as well, such "love magic" was of special significance to African Americans who, when enslaved, faced the constant threat of being separated from their spouses. Following the end of slavery, African American women still faced the problem of "wandering" spouses who, while traveling in search of work, might become involved with other women. "Wandering" husbands likewise feared that their wives might seek the attention of other men while they were gone.

Love charms took many forms. Randolph reported his familiarity with a love charm employing "twin rings."¹³ In Memphis, hoodoos created and sold "nation bags," mojos that were owned exclusively by women and were believed to give them the ability to manipulate men.¹⁴ Many hoodoos spoke boastfully of the power of the love charms that they concocted. One hoodoo woman assured a white reporter, who told her that a woman he desired had spurned him, that her spells would give the reporter complete control over the woman he fancied and would put the object of his affections "under his finger nail [sic]."¹⁵

Faced with such assurances, many African Americans placed great faith in the power of the love charms that were made for them by hoodoos and continued to believe in their efficacy despite all evidence to the contrary. William White, an African American arrested in Maryland for beating his wife after coming to believe that she was having an affair with another man, nevertheless continued to praise his "hoodoo," a spherical charm containing (among other ingredients) pieces of his wife's hair, which was supposed to keep Mrs. White faithful to her husband. Despite the charm's obvious failure, White reported "cheerfully...that he had worn it many years with great effect."¹⁶

Hoodoo women were also renowned for their reputed abilities to create charms and cast spells that could either harm one's enemies or protect one from the malevolent spells and charms cast or purchased by others. Skillfully made charms and spells were thought to have the power to soften the hearts of owners, overseers, and bosses so that they would be more lenient in their demands and punishments, less abusive in their use of physical discipline, and more generous with their allotment of rations. Some hoodoos concocted charms that reputedly protected slaves from being whipped by their masters; all the slaves needed to do was to chew a root "and spit towards their masters when they were angry with their slaves."¹⁷ Other hoodoos gave slaves magical powders to spread about their masters' houses.¹⁸

Hoodoo could also protect one from the vengeance of one's fellow slaves. William Grimes, for example, sought relief in a hoodoo spell from the supernatural vengeance of Aunt Frankee, an

¹¹ Memphis Minnie [Lizzie Douglas], *Hoodoo Lady*, Vocalion 03222, 45 rpm, 1936.

¹² Paschal Beverly Randolph, *Seership!* (n.p., 1870), <http://www.southern-spirits.com/randolph-on-hoodoo.html> (accessed November 17, 2008).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See Catherine Yronwode, "Spells of Female Domination," *Hoodoo in Theory and Practice*, <http://www.luckymojo.com/femaledomination.html> (accessed March 1, 2009).

¹⁵ *Fort Wayne (TX) Morning Journal-Gazette*, "Sure a Hoodoo Killed Her," August 16, 1903.

¹⁶ Mrs. L.D. Morgan, "Charms and Charm Medicines," *Catholic World*, June 1886, 323.

¹⁷ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (n.p., 1849), 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

elderly slave woman of whose drinking he had informed the master. The woman, Grimes believed, left her skin at night and “rode” him (much as spirits were believed to ride their devotees in voodoo dances), rendering him unable to move or call for help and nearly suffocating him in the process.¹⁹ As an adult, Mary Alicia Owen, the daughter of white southern slave owners, recounted her childhood experience of witnessing Aunt Mymee, one of her family’s slaves, driven to distraction and despair by the loss of her “jack ball” [a protective charm] that shielded her from the maleficent actions of others. When Mary Alicia found the missing charm and returned it to Aunt Mymee, the woman “sprang up with a joyful cry and kissed the bag and hugged the finder” and proceeded to demonstrate to the child the proper way to feed the “soul” that was contained within the bag.²⁰

When, following the Civil War, the maintenance of social order and the punishment of criminal activities in the African American community passed out of the control of white slave owners and into the hands of courts, African Americans found themselves confronted with a new set of challenges. No longer desirous of protecting valuable “property” (because African Americans were no longer property) and wanting to impress upon former slaves the fact that they still lived under white control, juries, which were usually white, doled out harsh punishments to African American offenders.²¹ To protect themselves from the vicissitudes of a white dominated legal system, many African American defendants turned to hoodoo women for help in proving their innocence or hiding their guilt.

Among the specialties of some hoodoo women were “courthouse spells,” which reputedly had the power to interfere with police investigations, silence witnesses, dissuade juries from finding defendants guilty, and encourage judges to impose lenient sentences on the convicted. Some hoodoos sold powders or potions with which defendants could wash themselves or their clothing before a jury returned with its verdict or a judge imposed a sentence. More dramatically, hoodoos might write witnesses’ names on pieces of paper, hide the paper inside cows’ or lambs’ tongues fastened shut with needles or pins, and then cook the tongue over a flame. (They often finished by having the client devour the tongue—having first removed the pins.)²² Famed New Orleans voodoo priestess Marie Laveau was one of many women who worked courthouse spells. On one occasion, according to a story published in the *San Antonio Light* in the early twentieth century, Laveau used her powers to free the son of a wealthy man who had been accused of the murder of a young woman who had, in fact, been killed by his acquaintances. In exchange for a large amount of money and a house, Laveau hid peppers that she had previously worked a charm over under the judge’s chair in the courtroom. The jury found the young man not guilty.²³ Perhaps the most notorious of all courthouse spell workers was a mysterious New Orleans hoodoo woman known as Madame Papaloos whose spells reportedly protected notorious African American gangster and killer Aaron Harris from paying for his numerous crimes.²⁴

Beyond their reputed ability to manipulate the legal system, hoodoos were believed by some people, both white and African American, to have the power to foresee the future or to alter historical events. Following the capture of New Orleans during the Civil War, newspapers reported the arrest of a group of free African American women (and a few white women) who were found

¹⁹ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (New York, 1825), 23-25.

²⁰ Mary Alicia Owen, *Voodoo Tales as Told Among the Negroes of the Southwest, Collected from Original Sources* (n.p., 1893), <http://www.southern-spirits.com/owen-hoodoo-luck-balls.html> (accessed November 17, 2008).

²¹ Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 282-83.

²² See Catherine Yronwode, “Court Case,” *Hoodoo in Theory and Practice*, <http://www.luckymojo.com/courtcase.html> (accessed December 12, 2008).

²³ Brian O’Brien, “Women and Gold,” *San Antonio (TX) Light*, December 5, 1913.

²⁴ Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, interview by Alan Lomax, 1938, tape recording, tape 1664B, Morton Narratives, Library of Congress, <http://www.doctorjazz.freeseve.co.uk/locspeech1.html> (accessed December 12, 2008). The authors of the website have provided a transcription of the recording.

performing a ritual to empower the Confederate army.²⁵ Many black and white southerners also believed that hoodoos were clairvoyant and thought that some had the ability to foresee the future. When Sallie Park expressed surprise that her slaves wished to summon a hoodoo woman to cure a sick woman and began to ask questions about the woman, one of Park's slaves warned her: "Hush, Miss Sallie, honey; she hears every word we says right now."²⁶ In September 1886, African Americans in Flemington, Georgia, a small town on the outskirts of Savannah, began to hold non-stop prayer meetings following the supposed announcement by "an old voodoo doctress" (who had momentarily returned from the dead) that the world would end on September 29.²⁷

The ability to cure, to bring luck, to harm, to protect, to predict the future, and potentially to alter the course of history gave hoodoo women great power within their communities. Hoodoos, unlike most African Americans, could manipulate the behavior of whites and gain assistance from them in times of need. Many wealthy whites (primarily women) consulted hoodoo women. White southern writer Thaddeus Norris noted with a mixture of amazement and disgust that in New Orleans one "could... [find] white women of wealth and respectability who had been influenced by their old negro servants."²⁸ While reliance on hoodoos was acceptable among some whites, this was not always the case. The relatives of one millionaire widow tried to overturn her will on the grounds that she was insane; one of the pieces of evidence offered to "prove" her insanity was the fact that the dead woman had "had a negro fortune teller call on her Monday and Wednesday evenings."²⁹

Even during slavery, hoodoos often had the ability to travel freely about the countryside in order to assist their numerous clients, a privilege denied to most other African Americans. Sallie Park noted that the hoodoo woman who had come to treat her slave seemed to have the ability to come and go "unquestioned [from] her mysterious home."³⁰ In a time and place when most African Americans could travel safely only with permission from their masters and a travel pass, the hoodoo woman seemingly appeared from nowhere and, when she left the Park plantation, her destination was unknown. As one of Park's slaves explained, "Nobody don't know whar she come from nor whar she's a-join to."³¹ Some hoodoo women were so famous that, in the twentieth century, their movements were tracked in newspapers as they moved from city to city (often while accompanying white employers), concocting charms and divining the future as they went. In 1937, for example, a New York newspaper, the *Olean Times-Herald*, recorded the presence in New York City of Ollie Hutchins, a renowned "conjure woman" from Alabama who was visiting Manhattan in her role as personal maid to Mrs. B. A. Jenkins.³²

The power of hoodoos can, perhaps, be best attested to by the fear and awe with which their neighbors and clients—both white and black—regarded them. This fear was often inculcated from childhood; African American servants in nineteenth-century New Orleans reportedly controlled disobedient white children by threatening to "give them to Marie [Laveau]" if they did not behave.³³ When the wife of Charles Trice, an African American resident of Brooklyn, New York, sued for divorce in 1880, Trice found that his witnesses were afraid to testify against his wife because they believed that she was "a Voodoo priestess" and feared her occult powers.³⁴ Often entire families

²⁵ Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 147.

²⁶ [Park], "Voodooism in Tennessee," 376.

²⁷ *New York Times*, "Waiting for the World's End," September 8, 1886.

²⁸ Thaddeus Norris, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Magazine* 6 (1870), 90-95.

²⁹ *Washington Post*, "She Sang to a Horse," May 19, 1910.

³⁰ [Park], "Voodooism in Tennessee," 380.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 376.

³² *Olean (NY) Times-Herald*, "Voodoo Now Rivals Heigh-De-Ho in Harlem Niteries," February 26, 1937.

³³ Hilda Phelps Hammond, "Behind the Veil of Voodooism in America," *Fresno (CA) Bee*, October 5, 1930.

³⁴ *New York Times*, "Brooklyn," August 25, 1880.

lived in terror of the hoodoos; the family of Annie Braxton, “in a state of fear little short of sheer panic,” spent nearly all of their money on payments to “witches” to save them from the curse that they believed had killed Annie.³⁵

The mixture of reverence and fear with which people regarded their hoodoo neighbors often caused them to do incredible things. When “an aged negress living in the vicinity [of 334 West 53rd Street in Manhattan] who [had] the reputation of possessing great powers of divination” confirmed the beliefs of Edward Francis that his elderly mother’s dreams of a fortune hidden beneath their rented house were real, Francis, his mother, and the hoodoo woman, following a “mysterious ceremony, and ...an incantation,” dug a hole six feet deep under the rear foundation of the dwelling. After “undermining the foundation wall,” the Francis family and the hoodoo woman continued to dig for gold until the other occupant of the house, a white man, observed what they were doing and called for help.³⁶

Even though the neighbors of many hoodoos feared them and believed that they could easily fall under their spell, most hoodoos were respected members of their communities. People sought their advice and assistance on matters of all kinds. Although no one denied that hoodoos could bring misfortune and death to their enemies, many whites and African Americans came to the conclusion that the assistance of hoodoos was a necessity of life and that, for the most part, in the words of blues singer Johnnie Temple, “The hoodoo is all right, in [they] lowdown plan.”³⁷

³⁵ “Sure A Hoodoo Killed Her.”

³⁶ *New York Times*, “Digging for Treasures,” January 19, 1878.

³⁷ [Johnnie Temple}, *Hoodoo Women*, Decca 7385, 45 rpm, 1937.

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