

Acquiescence and Dissent: Slave Religion and Conjure in the Antebellum South

By  
Derek Pace

Honors Thesis  
Department of Religious Studies  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

2016

Approved by:

Dr. Brendan Thornton, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Evyatar Marienberg, Reader

Dr. Todd Ochoa, Reader

## **Acknowledgements**

My deepest thanks and admiration go to Dr. Brendan Thornton, who served as my thesis advisor and provided invaluable feedback and advice throughout the research and writing process. His African-American Religions course convinced me to become a Religious Studies major and served as the inspiration for this thesis. I greatly appreciate the time and effort that Dr. Thornton has invested in me throughout my undergraduate career, and without his help and insight, my thesis process would not have been nearly as fulfilling and enriching as it was. Thank you, Dr. Thornton, for showing me how exciting the field of Religious Studies is, and helping me to discover an academic passion that I did not know I had.

I would also like to thank Drs. Evyatar Marienberg and Todd Ochoa, who served as readers of my thesis. Their insightful comments were very helpful to me in producing the final copy of the thesis. I greatly appreciate the time and effort that they invested in reading the thesis, as well as their desire to help me improve it and become a better writer and scholar.

Finally, I am indebted to Shaily Patel, whose Religion, Magic, and Science course motivated me to write a Religious Studies thesis based on the term paper that I wrote for that class. I am very thankful for the time that she invested in me during the course and for serving as a wonderful source of information and advice.

**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....2  
Chapter One: West African Approaches to Religion.....8  
Chapter Two: Slave Conversion and the Invisible Institution.....13  
Chapter Three: Conjure and the Supernatural in Slave Religion.....21  
Chapter Four: Conjure as Pragmatic Medicine and Weaponry.....29  
Chapter Five: Conjurers, Slave Preachers, and Godly Magic.....39  
Concluding Remarks.....45  
Bibliography.....48

## Introduction

*“...Mary Livermore, a northerner who spent three years on an antebellum plantation, recorded that she once encountered a conjurer-preacher known as Uncle Aaron, who exhorted believers to follow God from the pulpit, while raising evil spirits outside the walls of the church.”<sup>1</sup>*

The supernatural landscape that Livermore, a Massachusetts journalist, encountered in the Southern United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which a black man commanded authority as both a Christian preacher and one who was able to communicate with “evil spirits,” was by no means abnormal. Rather, this anecdote represents an important aspect of black American spirituality that transcended both space and time to unite enslaved Africans across the South. This thesis revolves around the ways in which black Americans in the antebellum period interacted with religion and the supernatural in an attempt to empower themselves amidst the horrors of the slave society. It is intended to serve as a contribution to the study of the slave experience in the South as well as an example of the adaptable nature of religion and the tenacity of the human spirit.

---

Taken from their homeland and thrown together on American plantations beginning in the early modern period, enslaved Africans in the South constructed “a distinct slave culture born of African and European-American heritage.”<sup>2</sup> The former heritage refers to African approaches to the supernatural in which humans have direct contact with spirits and good and evil are often complimentary rather than mutually exclusive. The latter represents the supernaturalism of American Christian slave-owners, who attempted to strip enslaved Africans of their “superstitions” and have them accept a world in which their sins had caused their enslavement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson. *Conjure in African American Society*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008, 79.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Roger Hepburn, “Conjure” in *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 1997), 187

By drawing on these cultural traditions, enslaved Africans constructed a unique, thoroughly African-American brand of supernatural experience that they used to make sense of the deplorable conditions of slavery and make the strangeness of the United States more understandable.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars such as Yvonne Chireau, Jeffrey E. Anderson, Newbell Niles Puckett, and Eugene D. Genovese, among many others, have revealed within this syncretic system of experience the vast significance of Conjure or “Hoodoo,” an African-American tradition of healing and harming that formed a supernatural connection between enslaved Africans from different parts of the continent and allowed them to create a space in which they could attempt to reclaim the personal agency that slavery had stolen from them.<sup>4</sup> As Chireau writes, “Conjure is a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as healing, protection, and self defense,” and that often “appears to have operated as a counterpart to religious belief and practice” within the slave quarters.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I want to expand on the research of the aforementioned scholars and further explore the place of Conjure within the religious culture of African-American slaves. It will be my contention that for many blacks in the antebellum South, Conjure served as a supernatural tool of subversion manifested in both the physical work of healing and harming and in the concerns of Christian religious life, both of which incorporated pragmatic and non-pragmatic concerns. The presence of Conjure in these areas of life allowed slaves to manage social

---

<sup>3</sup> Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*. New York: Atheneum, 1969, 268

<sup>4</sup> Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and The African-American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

relationships, mediate conflicts via supernatural means, and carve out a place within plantations for the practice of their own religious tradition.<sup>6</sup>

It is well documented that slaves reinterpreted American slave-owners' Christianity- what I call European supernaturalism- which was often rife with pro-slavery propaganda, in the context of traditions and beliefs that they had preserved from Africa. Perhaps one of the most important of these is the belief that "evil or good is based on man's reasoning and not on religion; it does not rely on a power over and above man, but it rather depends entirely on man" and is thus not an essential, clearly defined property.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, there was a widespread belief in a class of spirits with whom humans may interact and communicate.

Enslaved Africans did not, in other words, blindly accept the racially charged doctrines of many plantation owners and the white preachers who they employed. Rather, the historical record reveals many examples of slave Conjurers who doubled as Christian preachers and provided a trustworthy alternative to the Christianity of the slave-owners. Similarly, many Conjurers saw their authority as God-given and intended solely for upright use. They refused to visit misfortune on anyone and focused their talents on healing and other constructive ends. Relatedly, many slaves found solace in the biblical story of the enslaved Israelites, believing themselves to be a modern band of Israelites and using biblical passages to justify the use of Conjure in the slave quarters.

Christianity, with its focus on the afterlife and reliance on God for wellbeing, did not adequately address all of the issues that slaves faced in the plantation societies. Thus, slaves integrated Conjure into their understanding of Christianity to fill in the gaps that the religion left

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12-13

<sup>7</sup> Dasaolu, Babajide, and Demilade Oyelakun. "The concept of evil in Yoruba and Igbo thoughts: Some Comparisons." *Philosophia: E-Journal of Philosophy and Culture*.

behind. It is in this sense that Conjure manifested itself in the non-pragmatic concerns of slave religious life.

In a more pragmatic sense, slaves employed Conjure to affect the physical health, wellbeing, and fortunes of themselves, their fellow slaves, and even slave-owners, using readily available objects in an attempt to regain some of the bodily agency of which slavery had deprived them. Slaves could “conjure” others using objects as simple as a silver dime, a photograph, a piece of red flannel, graveyard dust, or a root, causing bad luck, insanity, and even death. Somewhat ironically, many Conjurers relied on these same objects to heal the harmful effects of Conjure. Indeed, Puckett provides a list of Conjure “recipes” that were believed to cure- and cause- everything from the common cold to indigestion to sexually transmitted infections.<sup>8</sup> The Conjuror, often called a “doctor” by the slaves, was supposedly able to not only help a victim of malevolent Conjure, but also turn the spell back on the one who had set it. In this way, Conjure functioned as a tool that allowed slaves a space in which to settle interpersonal conflicts with their fellow bondspersons on their own agency rather than relying on the slave-owners. It is in this sense that Conjure manifested itself in the pragmatic task of healing and harming in the slave quarters.

This conception of Conjure as a subversive, black tool of empowerment that manifested itself in both pragmatic and non-pragmatic concerns can give us a more nuanced understanding of the fact that for many blacks in the antebellum South, the physical and supernatural were often inseparable. Studies that apply the Western notion of mutual exclusivity between the two fail to capture the dynamic nature of slave religious life. Furthermore, scholars such as Puckett provide excellent accounts of Conjure as it functioned in the daily lives of slaves, but fail to make the

---

<sup>8</sup> See Newbell Niles Puckett. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. S.I.: Kessinger Pub., 2003, 360-92, for detailed descriptions of folk remedies for a variety of diseases and conditions.

connection between Conjure and Christianity that I have mentioned. As recently as 1939, ethnographer Hortense Powdermaker referred to black notions of supernatural causation as “lagging beliefs” without delving into the connections between these beliefs and Christianity.<sup>9</sup> This study, which recognizes the pragmatic/non-pragmatic duality mentioned above, will contribute to the contemporary scholarship on the relationship between Conjure and slave religion and lay the groundwork for further investigation into the legacy of Conjure in the US both before and after abolition.

I will first describe some aspects of the African supernaturalism that survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade, focusing on the distinction between a supreme God and lower spirits and the notion that supernatural work and religious experience may directly inform each other. This smattering of beliefs and traditions that slaves carried over from different areas of the continent formed the cultural basis from which Conjure eventually grew.

I will then give an historical overview of the circumstances surrounding the efforts of Southern missionaries and slave-owners to convert slaves to Christianity, along with a discussion of the idea that slave religion is best understood as an “invisible institution” that slaves were forced to practice under the cover of night and behind locked doors due to intense white surveillance in the public sphere. This idea becomes particularly important at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when slave-owners began to resist the Baptist and Methodist doctrine of the inherent equality and humanity of slaves. I close this section by outlining what slaves both gained and did not gain from Christianity, arguing that Conjure was used in an attempt to fill in the gaps of Christianity’s power and answer questions that this European supernaturalism could not address.

---

<sup>9</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 286



Afterward, I will describe in greater detail the aforementioned twofold manifestation of Conjure's influence and the ways in which slaves employed it as a system of authority in the face of a slave economy that attempted to deprive them of all agency. Understanding Conjure from a perspective of pragmatism provides an important perspective on the study of the antebellum slave experience that has been underrepresented in the contemporary literature. It is a description of this experience and its legacy that I hope to provide in what follows.

## Chapter I: West African Approaches to Religion

Scholars have identified several “similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual” among various religious traditions of West Africa, the area of the continent from which most enslaved Africans bound for the Americas came.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Puckett writes: “Roughly speaking, the six to twelve million Negro slaves brought to America came from that portion of the West Coast of Africa between the Senegal and Congo rivers...the principal [slave] markets were about the mouths of the Senegal, Gambia, Niger, and Congo...”<sup>11</sup> Other sources indicate that large numbers of slaves also came from the Angola region on the southwest coast of the continent.<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that while each tribe naturally differed in its approach to religion, there existed certain commonalities that slaves preserved throughout the slave trade and thereafter. While these characteristics are in no way fully descriptive of all African religious traditions- or even those of West Africa specifically- they do provide “a general description of the religious heritage of African slaves,” which formed the lens through which they eventually interpreted the supernaturalism of American Christianity and searched for a sense of self-worth in the secrecy of the slave quarters.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps foremost among these commonalities is that West African life at the dawn of the slave trade was thoroughly permeated by religion, which, as Genovese tells us, served as an

---

<sup>10</sup> Albert J. Raboteu, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 7

<sup>11</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. S.I.: Kessinger Pub., 2003, 3

<sup>12</sup> Steven Mintz, "Facts About the Slave Trade and Slavery," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Web.

<sup>13</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 7

inherent characteristic rather than merely an external aspect of daily life.<sup>14</sup> Religion, for many Africans, was the primary lens through which they viewed the world and the primary way in which they gave voice to the human experience. Many West Africans, for example, “envisioned the world as a multidimensional structure” that incorporated Earth as well as “the other realm, a land paralleling that of the living and inhabited by ancestors, ghosts, and spirits who were able to affect the lives of those in the earthly realm.”<sup>15</sup> Their conception of the universe left a special place for a sort of supernatural force that “was believed to dwell within organic and inorganic objects, in the elements of nature, and in the bodies of all animate beings.”<sup>16</sup>

The supernatural, in this conception, is not separated from the material world; it is an important part of daily life and can be used for any number of ends both constructive and destructive. Truly, for many slaves, the supernatural was as much a part of one’s conception of the world as was the physical world itself, and took the forms of “highly structured cosmologies, concepts of a diffused monotheism, rituals of sacred mediation, an emphasis on devotion to ancestors and the dead, and the use of spiritually efficacious objects.”<sup>17</sup>

Religion for West African slaves, however, was by no means separate from what the Western world understands to be magic, or pragmatic instances of supernatural causation; in historical context, the two always served as bedfellows in some way or another. As E. Bolaji Idowu writes, “With particular reference to Africa, we cannot discuss magic...except as seen in

---

<sup>14</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Random House, 1976, 210

<sup>15</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 37

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

the light of religion...we are discussing it as an element in the structure of a religion.”<sup>18</sup> Let us take rain as an example. As many pre-colonial African tribes depended on rain for the growth of crops, history reveals the existence of African “Rainmakers,” who were “highly religious, spending considerable time praying to God for rain and other blessings. Some rainmakers were also known to use ‘rain stones,’ sacred stones believed to have fallen from the sky in order to produce rain, while others make a huge fire with various kinds of plants to produce thick billows of smoke in order to charm rain from the clouds.”<sup>19</sup> To the Rainmakers, religion and “magic” went hand in hand with little dissonance.

Another example comes from the Ankole people in what is now Uganda. Their religious tradition centered on a god- Ruhanga- who was understood to be the ultimate source of all things and the sustainer of all life, as well as malevolent ancestral spirits- the Emizimu- who often plague the living with disease and misfortune. Malevolent activity can be detected with the help of a diviner, who “may use material means such as a grasshopper, seeds, cowrie shells or the guts of a chicken” to determine the origin of the magic and an appropriate solution.<sup>20</sup> Both Ruhanga and the Emizimu exist concurrently in the same cosmology, with diviners serving as mediators on behalf of humanity. It is thus clear that we should regard the Western conception of religion and magic as mutually exclusive with great caution. Indeed, in the African context, “a sharp delineation

---

<sup>18</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: a Definition*. S.C.M. Press, 1973, 189

<sup>19</sup> Grace L. Chavis Butler, *Africa : Religions and Culture, with a Focus on the Ashanti People*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Dorrance Publishing Co., 1994, 229

<sup>20</sup> F. B. Welbourn. "The Idea of a High God in Three East African Societies." *Nurelweb: The Cults and Religion Website*. University of Calgary, 1964. Web. 7 Oct. 2015.

between ‘magic’ and ‘religion’ can be misleading, for these notions were nearly always connected in practice.”<sup>21</sup>

From this base springs the belief in a supreme God, a divine yet withdrawn deity who sustains the universe but chooses to remain relatively uninvolved in human affairs. This is quite a distinction from the intimate and involved nature of the God that many Protestant slave-owners envisioned. A class of lower spirits who play an observable role in our world contrasts this inaccessible deity. Africans of various traditions directed the bulk of their attention and worship to these spirits, which, when invoked, may directly interact with humans. Many of these spirits have distinct personalities and emotions and are able to use their connection to the human realm for ends both constructive and destructive.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, one may placate and appeal to them through “dutiful praise, sacrifice, and obedience.”<sup>23</sup>

A word is due here about the West African tradition of using physical objects as vessels for supernatural power, which seemed to be well understood by slaves from various parts of the continent. While European colonists referred to this concept as “fetishism” as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, modern scholars have begun to avoid this word due to its imperialistic connotations.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the concept itself had a significant impact on the worldview that slaves brought to the US. In various West African traditions, objects are not simply objects as such; rather, they can be imbued with supernatural authority and used as tools for both good and evil.

For example, consider the *nkisi* of the BaKongo people, which are understood to be spirits “represented as a container of sacred substances which are activated by supernatural

---

<sup>21</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 39

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>23</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 10

<sup>24</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 40

forces that can be summoned into the physical world.”<sup>25</sup> The *nkisi* can be carved figures, pottery, shells, or a bundle of any such small items. The object itself is not the focus; it is a conduit for the power that it contains. Puckett argues that cultural survivals such as these contributed to the prevalence of objects such as roots and photographs within Conjure.<sup>26</sup>

These traditions are but a sample of those that formed a large part of the “initial cultural situation for an aggregate of recently enslaved Africans.”<sup>27</sup> With this in mind, I now turn to an examination of the birth of slave Christianization efforts in the antebellum South.

---

<sup>25</sup> Shawnya Harris, "Nkisi Nkondi, Kongo people." Khan Academy. Web.

<sup>26</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 523-4

<sup>27</sup> Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 45

## Chapter II: Slave Conversion and the Invisible Institution

Until the beginning of the Great Awakening, a vast Christian revival in reaction to the supposed faults of an increasingly secular society, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, multiple difficulties plagued the conversion efforts of Protestant missionaries, including the inability of masters to communicate effectively with slaves and a lack of sufficiently qualified clergy in the South. However, the South was plagued perhaps most of all by “the antipathy of colonists themselves,”<sup>28</sup> many of whom feared that the Christian doctrine of equality would lead slaves to undermine the social and economic authority of slave-owners.<sup>29</sup> There are many examples of colonial attempts to resolve the dissonance between Christian equality and whites’ fear of religious slaves. One comes in the form of a 1664 request that the upper house of Maryland create an edict denying that the conversion of slaves obligated masters to free them.<sup>30</sup>

Much of the popular fear of religious slaves stemmed from the fact that many slave-owners had “a keen awareness of the possible connections between black rebellion and black religion, an awareness that was apparently the property of many southern white persons.”<sup>31</sup> For example, Vincent Harding describes a law passed by the South Carolina state legislature in 1800 that restricted the rights of blacks to assemble “even in company with white persons...for the purpose of...religious worship, either before the rising of the sun or after the going down of the same.”<sup>32</sup> Three decades later, in 1831, Richard Byrd of Virginia wrote to the governor of that

---

<sup>28</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 99

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

<sup>31</sup> Vincent Harding, “Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Slaves, 1800-1860”, in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 111

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 111-2

state, complaining that “slave preachers used their religious meetings as veils for revolutionary schemes.”<sup>33</sup>

History reveals that such schemes often did exist, with slave preacher Nat Turner being perhaps the most well known example of his time. Sources indicate that Turner, born in 1800, was “deeply committed to his Christian faith and believed he received messages from God through visions and signs in nature,” which “are believed to have inspired his insurrection.”<sup>34</sup> Turner drew directly on both African- and Christian-derived supernatural practices in planning and executing his rebellion and incorporated into his writings “divine pronouncements, otherworldly revelations, and graphic apocalyptic visions.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Turner paints himself as an instrument of divine will in his *Confessions*: “...and then again I had the same revelation, which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty.”<sup>36</sup>

This purpose came to fruition in 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia, and resulted in the deaths of about 55 whites. Turner escaped into a forest and hid for several weeks until he was eventually found and hanged. Even after his death, however, Turner’s legacy lived on: “In the minds of blacks and whites alike religion and rebellion had been welded into one terrifying- or

---

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 113

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer L. Larson, "A Rebellion to Remember: The Legacy of Nat Turner." *Documenting the American South*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, n.d. Web. 5 Oct. 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 63

<sup>36</sup> Nat Turner. "The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, V.A." *Documenting the American South*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries. n.d. 2 Jan. 2016.



exalting- reality through the black body of Nat Turner.”<sup>37</sup> This reality became an important part of the changes that the Awakening brought to the American south.

Luther P. Jackson divides the social and religious effects of the Awakening into several stages. The first, which ranges from 1750-1790, was marked by “awakened consciousness and mass enthusiasm” with regard to the conversion of slaves.<sup>38</sup> In the states of the Upper South (generally extending to and stopping at the South Carolina border) slaves were welcomed by Christian missionaries, especially those of the Baptist and Methodist denominations. Indeed, many churches of these denominations were known for their strong abolitionist sentiments, and their missionaries supported the humane treatment of slaves and even welcomed them into the congregation as equals in Christ. It was then that the popularity of Baptism and Methodism among slaves began. It was not to last, however.

After 1790, the anti-slavery rhetoric of several Southern churches was questioned by slave-owners, whose control over the region’s social and religious life had increased. Slave insurrections with religious motivations- such as that of Nat Turner in later decades- led slave-owners to crack down on blacks throughout the region. The idea that unchecked religiosity had given rise to a coordinated slave rebellion that resulted in the deaths of fifty-five whites led many slave-owners to see Christianity as a tool for social control and dominance that they could use to subdue slaves and stifle future rebellions.

This represented a significant shift in the move toward the proselytization of slaves: their owners began to fear not religious slaves, but those whose religious beliefs did not come directly from the slave-owners themselves and thus posed a threat to their social and economic authority. As more slave-owners began to call for the proselytization of their slaves, many antislavery

---

<sup>37</sup> Harding, “Religion and Resistance,” 118

<sup>38</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 185

congregations, such as the Baptists and Methodists, began to shirk their abolitionist image in favor of a more pro-slavery brand in an attempt to gain the trust of slave-owners and thus gain access to the hearts and minds of their slaves. From the perspective of abolitionist Southern churches, valuing the eternal salvation of the souls of slaves required acquiescing- externally, at least- to the existing system of slavery. There was no other way to gain the “blessings and active support” of slave-owners.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, an important consequence of slave rebellions is that slave-owners- and state and local governments- began to take more control over the religious messages to which their slaves had access. Vincent Harding indicates that the Turner rebellion inspired a wave of new laws throughout the South that restricted the religious rights of blacks, citing an 1831 Mississippi law that prescribed brutal whippings for blacks who attempted to preach the Gospel.<sup>40</sup> Other examples abound, including an 1833 raid of slave author Frederick Douglass’s Sunday school in Maryland and an 1839 New Orleans newspaper article that complained of the potential insurrections brewing in the city’s black churches.<sup>41</sup>

However, not all resistance on the part of slaves came in the form of violent rebellions. Rather, “a more common religious response to slavery was simply the act of refusing to believe the Christian teachings that justified the system of exploitation” in which they lived.<sup>42</sup> Slaves were wary of the pro-slavery teachings of the white preachers commissioned by their owners. Such teachings implored the slaves to remain obedient to their owners in hopes of achieving eternal life after death, assumedly after living a docile life pleasing to God. Identifying closely

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 188

<sup>40</sup> Harding, “Religion and Resistance,” 118

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 118-9

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 120

with the biblical story of the Israelites living in bondage in Egypt, many slaves defied such teachings and refused to place their faith in the God of the slave-owners.

Despite the increasing fear of slave-owners that their slaves would become tainted by the “wrong” brand of Christianity, however, the historical record is clear: the antebellum years were also marked by a certain amount of ambivalence of slave-owners toward the Christianization of their own slaves. Certainly, some feared that Christian slaves would usurp their authority, as mentioned above. At the same time, though, others feared for the fate of the souls of their unconverted slaves, and still others wondered whether blacks even had souls.<sup>43</sup> The historical scene at the time was not one of complete and total opposition to the conversion of slaves, but rather one of uncertainty and ambivalence, an atmosphere that continued even after the Awakening took hold in the South in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, some slave owners did not pay much attention to the religiosity of their slaves until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, choosing to let them practice their religion on their own time.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, it is important to note that some slave-owners seemed to genuinely care about the salvation of their slaves. Genovese attributes this to a deepening of “the religious feelings of the masters...their efforts for the slaves were taking on a stronger moral tone.”<sup>45</sup> The diaries of various Southern slave-owners reveal evidence of what seems to be a concern for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the blacks on their plantations: “George De Berniere Hooper of Alabama referred to the death of a slave as the loss not only of a ‘friend’ but of a ‘Brother in Christ,’” while Everard Green Baker of Mississippi “went to considerable trouble to swap land

---

<sup>43</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 224

<sup>44</sup> Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 185

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

strips with his neighbors so that his slaves would have an easier time getting to church.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, even as more slave-owners began to push for the Christianization of slaves out of fear of potential rebellions from slaves whose religion they deemed unsafe, men such as Hooper and Baker expressed a moral concern for their slaves that went beyond rebellions and race relations. The historical situation was, again, one of ambivalence and mixed responses from slave-owners with respect to the religiosity of slaves.

Regardless, we must remember that after the Turner rebellion in 1831, slave-owners began to take more control over the religious life of their slaves. However, as the preachers on their payroll disseminated their supernaturalism from society’s upper ranks, slaves analyzed it in the context of their preserved African supernaturalism, incorporating into the former their notions of healing and harming and the idea that they, much like the enslaved children of Israel about whom they read in the Bible, would eventually be delivered from bondage. Chireau summarizes this idea: “...a kinship emerged between supernaturalism and slave Christianity. As Protestantism became more widely embraced and indigenized among American-born blacks, remaining elements of African supernatural lore were incorporated into organized religious life, while others were absorbed into African American folk beliefs.”<sup>47</sup>

Here we must note the covert development of this unique religious tradition, an idea that informs Franklin Frazier’s concept of the “invisible institution,”<sup>48</sup> the idea that, “forbidden and unable to maintain collective African religious practices”<sup>49</sup> in the way that they had been in

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 190-1

<sup>47</sup> Yvonne P. Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 229

<sup>48</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 16

<sup>49</sup> Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity,” 229

Africa, slaves created their own traditions outside of white surveillance. Any deviation from the “official” Christianity resulted in punishment. Thus, slaves relied on the cover of night and the security of locked doors to protect them from the watchful eyes of the slave-owners,<sup>50</sup> thereby subverting white religious narratives of obedience and submission by creating for themselves spaces within the boundaries of plantations in which they “sought a renewed vision of their worth.”<sup>51</sup>

It is in this sense that we speak of slave religion as an invisible institution: a social and cultural tradition that developed in hidden spaces out of necessity. At this point, it could be argued that black Christianity is little different from “the many examples of oppressed people internalizing and institutionalizing the ideology of their oppressors in their own social organizations.”<sup>52</sup> Raboteau fields this criticism:

...black Evangelicals went beyond institutional separatism: they denied the doctrinal basis of “slaveholding Christianity” by refusing to believe that God had made them inferior to whites. Though whites might appeal to scriptural texts, such as “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be until his brethren,” or “Servants be obedient to them that are your masters,” blacks rejected the notion that either the Bible or Christianity supported American slavery.<sup>53</sup>

Slaves adapted the European traditions that they encountered in the US and made them their own, crafting a religious system that ultimately gave them “an invaluable sense of personal meaning and direction.” Raboteau summarizes this idea in a sentence from which the title of this

---

<sup>50</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 215

<sup>51</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, “The Black Experience in American Evangelicalism”, in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 101

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96

thesis has been taken: “Oppression may easily force outward acquiescence, but internal dissent is virtually impossible to control.”<sup>54</sup>

Christianity, however, did not supply all of the answers that slaves sought. For instance, it did not tell them why a just and loving God allowed them to remain enslaved and did not directly address daily interpersonal conflicts and socially inappropriate behavior such as infidelity and dishonesty.<sup>55</sup> It is at this point that we must turn our focus to Conjure and the ways in which slaves adapted it to fill the holes that Christianity left behind.

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 101

### Chapter III: Conjure and the Supernatural in Slave Religion

Consider the following excerpt from an interview of former slave Silvia Witherspoon, in which she discusses the influence of a local man named Monroe King as well as her own strategies for avoiding harm in rural Alabama:

I keeps a flour sifter an' a fork by my bed to keep de witches f'um ridin' me. How come I knows dey rides me? Honey, I bees so tired In de mawnin' I kin scarcely git outten my bed, an' its all on account of dem witches ridin' me, so I putt de sifter dere to cotch 'em. Sometimes I wears dis dime wid de hole in it aroun' my ankle to keep off the conjure, but since Monroe King tuk an' died us ain't had much conjerin' 'roun' here. You know that ole nigger would putt a conjure on somebody for jus' a little sum of money. He sold conjure bags to keep the sickness away. He could conjure de grass an' de birds, an' anything he wanted to.<sup>56</sup>

Witherspoon understands Conjure to be a supernatural phenomenon that is often used for evil ends, in this case manifested in the form of witches “riding” the unfortunate victim. Conjure manifests itself in clear ways within our world, and one can use everyday objects, including a fork, a dime, and a flour sifter, to counter its effects. Moreover, a select group of individuals has special knowledge of and control over the forces of Conjure and can manipulate them at will, often for a price. This account provides an excellent springboard from which to begin our look at Conjure in the slave quarters of the South.

Folklorist Jeffrey E. Anderson understands Conjure to be a body of knowledge and system of practices that “falls between the two extremes of religion proper and low-level supernaturalism.”<sup>57</sup> Through this lens, Conjure can be seen as a sort of middle category between such institutionalized Afro-American religions as Vodoú and Santería and common slave notions of the supernatural that were fairly widespread and required no specific training or specialization,

---

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 59

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, x

like the belief that “lending salt or red pepper was bad luck.”<sup>58</sup> The aforementioned religions are syncretic traditions that, like Conjure, draw on an amalgamation of African-derived supernatural practices. However, we must first make certain distinctions between religion and Conjure. The two are not always and everywhere the same, and thus should not mistakenly be equated.

Vodoú originated in Haiti and entered the US by way of New Orleans. It draws on the traditions of African groups such as the Fon and the Yoruba and revolves primarily around the spirits that these tribes recognized and worshipped. Vodoú incorporates a plethora of “Catholic saint images to represent the Lwa (spirits)”<sup>59</sup> that interact with humans. Santería originated in Cuba and, as described by some practitioners, is centered specifically on the traditions of the Yoruba, including the worship of the tribe’s *orishas*, lower spirits who are often associated with natural phenomena such as wind, water, and lightning, as well as symbols such as the crossroads.<sup>60</sup> From the perspective of one practitioner, Conjure is not a religion because it:

uses the magical techniques of the Congo people of Africa without any of the religion. There is no presence of the nkisi, orishas, or lwa of Africa. In fact, most people who practice Hoodoo are Protestant Christians. You’ll see hoodoo workers also being called rootworkers or conjurers. They make magical charms called mojo bags, or jack balls. They’ll use magical powders, herbal cleansing baths, candles or lamps for spell work.<sup>61</sup>

Conjure also does not incorporate the revolutionary fire that has historically marked Vodoú. Sources tell us that the religion “played a significant role in the successful slave revolution that ended French rule on the island” in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and led to

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., xi

<sup>59</sup> Oní Shangó, Ekun Dayo. "What is the difference between Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Santeria?." Santeria Church of the Orishas. Web.

<sup>60</sup> Santeria Church of the Orishas. "Orishas." Web.

<sup>61</sup> Shangó and Dayo, “Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Santería.” Web.



the establishment of Haiti as the world's first independent black republic.<sup>62</sup> Rather, Conjure, insofar as it acted as a subversive tool of empowerment, actually *required* the constraints of the slave system. It did not aim to revolutionize the status quo of slavery, but rather to work within it to create for slaves an arena in which they could negotiate interpersonal conflicts on their own terms. Unlike Nat Turner's famous 1831 rebellion in Virginia, which was intended to overthrow the slave society, Conjure depended on secrecy and individuality. Both can be read as critiques of white supremacy and instances of dissent against the slave society, but Conjure worked within, rather than directly against, the society as it was.

Conjure, then, was institutionalized only in an unofficial sense. Recall that Chireau views Conjure as a sort of "vernacular religion" by which slaves attempted to fill in the gaps of knowledge that the European traditions of slave-owners did not address; it was often practiced alongside Christianity, and slaves integrated the two into a syncretic lens of experience while seeing little or no dissonance between them, but Conjure itself was not religion. In other words, one could practice Conjure without Christianity, and *vice versa*. Moreover, Conjure does not require ritual appeals to saints, spirits, or gods; it relies instead on personal, cause-and-effect supernatural transactions that hinge on real human emotions such as jealousy and anger. Additionally, while both Vodoú and Santería involve the human approximation of divine essence, Conjure represents a certain paradox in that it can both cause and alleviate suffering in the same stroke.<sup>63</sup> Finally, we should bear in mind that in the slave quarters of the South, while both the slave preacher and the Conjuror were understood to be influential spiritual leaders, only

---

<sup>62</sup> Fanthorpe, Lionel, and Patricia Fanthorpe. *Mysteries and Secrets of Voodoo, Santeria, and Obeah*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2008, 121-2

<sup>63</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 101

the latter was “a professional magic practitioner who typically receives payment in return for his or her goods or services.”<sup>64</sup>

Conjure is by no means the only New World folk tradition that incorporates African-derived power. Consider Obeah, a parallel practice found primarily among enslaved Africans in the Caribbean during the colonial era. Obeah, which Alexander Giraldo defines as “the practice of harnessing supernatural forces and spirits for one’s own personal use,” was believed to allow slaves to cure illness, protect a fellow slave, poison an enemy, and even revive the dead.<sup>65</sup> The Obeah men, as they were known, commanded a significant amount of authority from their fellow slaves and often elicited fear among plantation owners and other whites in the colonies of Jamaica. Many Obeah men were known for their extensive knowledge of natural remedies and toxins; thus, “deaths by poison began to take on a form of covert rebellion amongst those slaves who had rancor and access to their plantation owners or overseers. Most of the slaves who wished to poison someone but lacked the knowledge turned to the Obeah man.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, although slaves in Jamaica sometimes disguised Obeah-fueled rebellions as religious meetings, Obeah itself, like Conjure, was a system of pragmatic power and not an institutionalized religion.

Having established a basic framework through which to view Conjure, we must now examine its influence in African-American religious life. In what follows, I want to uphold Anderson’s contention that “for average African-Americans...Christianity and conjure were not mutually exclusive systems of belief.”<sup>67</sup> Drawing on Anderson’s research as well as that of authors such as Chireau, Puckett, and John Blassingame, I will show that in the South, Conjure

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., x

<sup>65</sup> Alexander Giraldo. "Religion and Resistance: Obeah: The Ultimate Resistance ." University of Miami.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 79

occupied a crucial position within the realm of slave religion and often served as a complement to the European-derived supernaturalism of American Christianity. Before moving into a more detailed discussion of Conjure, I will highlight below some historical examples to show several ways in which “bondspersons challenged slave-owner hegemony and retained a powerful ancestral heritage” within the plantation society by way of Conjure.<sup>68</sup>

The historical record contains multiple examples of slaves using powders, charms, and similar objects in an attempt to “prevent whippings and similar mistreatment.”<sup>69</sup> Consider Fredrick Douglass and Henry Bibb, both of whom turned to Conjurers to avoid the violence of slave-owners. The latter received “a powder of alum, salt, and other substances and a bitter root,” and the former only a root.<sup>70</sup> These items appeared to work for both men, but in quite different ways. Douglass, after his trip to the Conjurer, avoided whippings for the rest of his life; Bibb, however, after avoiding one whipping, became overly confident and adopted a flippant attitude with his master on a subsequent occasion, resulting in a beating that eroded his faith in Conjure.<sup>71</sup> Another example comes in the form of various powders that were said to distract watchdogs from the trail when thrown over the footsteps of a runaway slave.<sup>72</sup>

The roots of Conjure in several West African societies have already been discussed. In Africa, supernatural power can be employed for a variety of reasons, including obtaining wealth or fame, protecting one’s possessions from theft, gaining and keeping a lover, and causing

---

<sup>68</sup> Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity”, 226

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 84

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

physical illness and death.<sup>73</sup> As British ethnographer Mary Kingsley summarizes: “Charms are made for every occupation and desire in life- loving, hating, buying, selling, fishing, planting, traveling, hunting, etc.”<sup>74</sup> The same is true of the American context, with the common denominator being human emotion, particularly jealousy and anger. It is these emotions that led slaves to take into their own hands the power to dispense justice, thereby critiquing- whether intentionally or otherwise- the white-dominated judicial system of the time. Conjure gave slaves the ability to take a more active role in dispensing justice and addressing societal conflicts and imbalances than did Christianity. Its power lay not in the influence that it gave slaves over whites, but rather in the influence that it gave slaves over themselves. The mere fact that slaves recognized the supernatural authority of their fellow slaves undermined the “doctrine of black impotence” that slave-owners and pro-slavery preachers promulgated.<sup>75</sup>

This also points to the substantial influence that Conjurers had on the plantations, a concept that puts into relief John Blassingame’s assertion that “in many instances, the Conjuror had more control over the slaves than the master had,” even to the point of striking fear into the hearts of the slaves.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Conjurers both male and female were socially set apart from their slave peers both physically and mentally in the same way that the shamans of pre-colonial Africa were. Puckett provides a description of these distinctions from his fieldwork:

In Africa the witch-doctor is usually selected because of some physical or mental peculiarity which shows him to be possessed of a spirit. I have noticed that the American witch-doctor is also possessed of unusual mentality and often shows

---

<sup>73</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 259-61

<sup>74</sup> Mary H. Kingsley. *Travels in West Africa: Congo Français, Corisco, and Cameroons*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897, 448

<sup>75</sup> Genovese, *After Jordan*, 221

<sup>76</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 110

physical peculiarities as well. [Folklorist] Miss [Mary] Owen mentions a “Witcheh-man” as having a whopple-jaw, a hare-lip, a lop-side, a crooked leg, one eye like fire and the other eye dead.<sup>77</sup>

In short, Conjurers were not ordinary people. They were often physically deformed, socially marginalized, and reclusive. Many of them were set apart at birth by being born with a caul, which was thought to imply a supernatural touch from the very beginning.<sup>78</sup> Powdermaker’s fieldwork in Mississippi from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century makes it clear that many of these ideas about the “otherness” of Conjurers persisted after abolition. Most of the Conjurers with whom she spoke reported feeling called to Conjure at a young age, and many of them lived outside of their communities in old farmhouses, often maintaining an office in their home.<sup>79</sup>

With this information in mind, it is not unreasonable to surmise that some Conjurers may have leveraged these existing physical distinctions and peculiarities to solidify their status as supernatural leaders in the slave communities. The qualities, which are associated with Conjure in the first place, provided an economic incentive to market oneself as such and increased one’s chances of gaining authority that was recognized and legitimated by one’s peers.

In an intellectual sense, Conjurers were also marked by extraordinary mental insight and wisdom, usually thought to be God-given, even when they had had little or no formal schooling. Puckett describes correspondence that he received from a Dr. H. Roger Williams of Mobile, Alabama, who described how this idea manifested itself in the typical Conjurer of his area: “...he has never been to school a day in his life” and knows “nothing but what he has learned of

---

<sup>77</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 201

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 336

<sup>79</sup> Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 290-5

God.”<sup>80</sup> This ascription of divinely inspired knowledge further augments the social authority that the Conjurer was able to command. Indeed, Puckett verifies this idea when discussing a Mississippi Conjurer named Ed Murphy, who was known for living alone and keeping to himself. This reclusive tendency, coupled with the three birthmarks located on his arm- which he associated with the Christian Holy Trinity - and the knowledge that he had been born with a caul, gave him “a tremendous influence with the Negroes of that locality.”<sup>81</sup>

Having established that a primary use of Conjure was the negotiation of interpersonal conflicts in the slave quarters, I will focus in what follows on both the pragmatic and non-pragmatic sides of Conjure. The former incorporated African-derived herbal healing and harming practices, whereas the latter consisted in large part of Conjure’s status as a compliment to European supernaturalism primarily in the form of Christianity.

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 203-4

<sup>81</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 202

#### Chapter IV: Conjure as Pragmatic Medicine and Weaponry

The historical record is very clear: Conjure was believed to be responsible for a plethora of both physical maladies and cures in the plantation societies, an idea that reveals even further the power and influence that Conjurers commanded. They could cause anything from “bad luck, discomfort, or other inconveniences” to severe constipation, insanity, and even death.<sup>82</sup> Some even had the ability to “send” animals such as snakes and lizards into the bodies of their victims, which could cause a very slow and painful death as the supposed reptile, which often turned out to be an intestinal parasite, ate the victim alive.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, they could use divination to detect malevolent Conjure directed at one slave by another and produce natural remedies to not only alleviate the negative effects of the spell, but also turn it back on its originator. In short, Conjure, in the collective slave mindset, was capable of causing considerable physical and emotional harm, and by using it to create observable changes in their fellow slaves and even the slave-owners, slaves attempted to re-appropriate a portion of the bodily agency that slavery had stolen from them.

Conjure, in this sense, represents a certain paradox, in that it can both cause harm and alleviate its effects, as has been pointed out by several authors, most notably Chireau: “Conjure healing was therapeutic, but Conjure also caused the afflictions that necessitated treatment.”<sup>84</sup> It is important to remember, however, that Conjure itself is simply a malleable tool that can be used to fit various agendas both benevolent and malevolent, pragmatic and impractical. It is thus, in a way, amoral: its effects depend on the way in which it is used by the people who employ it; it has no agency of its own. Chireau errs in attributing to Conjure a certain moral aspect that it does not

---

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 80

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 101

have. One who wants to use Conjure to drive an unfaithful lover out of town and afflict him with a deadly illness or horrible luck may do so; alternatively, one may use Conjure to create peace between husband and wife or master and slave, or to reverse a harmful charm. The difference is in human intentions. To be sure, all sorts of physical and emotional afflictions were attributed to Conjure. However, the power of Conjure itself has no will; it bends to that of the Conjurer.

Popular slave notions of the causes of affliction underwrote all acts of Conjure. As in the pre-colonial tribes of West Africa, slaves understood both affliction and healing through a causal lens, connecting “physical suffering with the spiritual forces around which their lives revolved.”<sup>85</sup> Physical affliction, whether death, illness, or even bad luck, was not simply affliction as such; spiritual causes lay behind every misfortune. This is not to say that slaves ignored the developing medical knowledge of the time. Rather, their understanding of affliction was simply more inclusive of supernatural causes than was the dominant medical canon: “Affliction...was viewed as a kind of attack by an invisible agent, motivated by human intent.”<sup>86</sup>

Slaves often recognized the physical causes underlying an upset stomach, headache, or virus. For instance, Puckett reports that a snake could supposedly be cast into a victim’s body by causing him or her to eat food sprinkled with the ground skin of a dead snake.<sup>87</sup> The “snake” was in most cases a tapeworm or other such parasite, as many slaves understood.<sup>88</sup> However, to them, Conjure had *caused* these symptoms in the first place, a conception not found in the medical

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>87</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 250

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



knowledge of whites. Conjure was a causal system that tapped into the natural processes of the human body to produce observable, pragmatic effects.

Human intent is perhaps the most important piece of this puzzle. Every act of harming in the slave quarters, in the minds of the slaves, stemmed in some way from emotions, especially jealousy, anger, greed, and lovesickness. Emotions were the engine that set Conjure into motion and the catalyst that caused many slaves to return to their local Conjuror when a charm or spell did not produce the intended effect. Consider Eulalia, a Louisiana Conjuror who “specialized in Man-and-woman cases” and could “tie them [clients] up with some man or woman or...loose them from love.”<sup>89</sup> On one occasion, at the request of an enamored woman, Eulalia drove away a man’s cruel lover by burying a lemon infused with gunpowder and a slip of paper bearing the couple’s names in the woman’s yard.<sup>90</sup> The woman married her newly liberated lover shortly thereafter.

Consider also the example of Celestine, a bitter New Orleans woman who had a disagreeable reputation for her repeated attempts to harm her neighbors. Zora Neale Hurston reports that Celestine once used five nickels, a sieve, a pair of shears, and several black candles in an attempt to harm a neighbor with whom she had had a disagreement.<sup>91</sup> Celestine’s anger fueled her malevolent use of Conjure, just as Eulaila’s client was driven by her lovesickness and jealousy.

Each case of harmful Conjure could be traced to some kind of interpersonal conflict, and each spell, even if widely employed throughout the South, represented a unique, pragmatic

---

<sup>89</sup> Zora Neale Hurston. *Mules and Men*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, 187

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-9

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-2

attempt to resolve such a conflict. It is this intimacy and individuality of black American causal harming that prompted Reverend G.C. Brown, a Methodist preacher of Johns Island, South Carolina, to remark in 1936- a full 71 years after the abolition of slavery in the US- that the blacks on the island feared each other due to commonly held beliefs about the harming capacity of Conjure.<sup>92</sup>

Almost any commonplace object could be used to “trick”- or heal- a fellow slave, an idea that lends itself to the aforementioned idea, commonplace among several pre-colonial African traditions, that objects could be imbued with supernatural power. A photograph hung upside down was thought to cause headaches, mental illness, or even death to the person depicted therein; similarly, death would come swiftly if one buried another’s photograph or, somewhat more graphically, nailed it to a tree and shot it with a gun for nine subsequent days.<sup>93</sup> The use of photographs in Conjure harkens to James Frazer’s concept of homeopathic magic, which “is founded on the association of ideas by similarity...things which resemble each other are the same.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, damage done to a photograph was believed to translate directly to the person depicted therein.

Another of Frazer’s concepts explains the prevalence within Conjure of body parts such as nail clippings and hair. Contagious magic allows one to assume “that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether

---

<sup>92</sup> G.C. Brown. Interview with Guy Carawan. FT-3610: Tape 2 of 2, in the Guy and Candie Carawan Collection #20008, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>93</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 244-5

<sup>94</sup> James G. Frazer. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. N.p.: Temple of Earth Publishing, 1922. Web. 20b.

it formed part of his body or not.”<sup>95</sup> Thus, pieces of an intended victim’s body, or objects that have been in contact with it such as articles of clothing, maintain a connection to the victim even after the contact is severed. These concepts- contagion and homeopathy- together explained the rationale behind many causal harming practices in the slave societies.

Another commonly used object was the dime, which, as mentioned above by Silvia Witherspoon, offered protection from malevolent Conjure and could also serve as a divinatory aid to Conjurers by “turn[ing] black or blue in the presence of evil.”<sup>96</sup> A number of other common objects also allowed Conjurers to detect and counteract dangerous charm bags, including coffee grounds, crystals, and decks of playing cards.<sup>97</sup> Lacking access to economic resources and trapped in poverty by the plantation system, slaves played out their conflicts using the objects that were readily available to them. In this sense, the objects that many slaves used to “conjure” one another were quite ordinary and not supernatural. The supernatural aspect of Conjure comes in the causal potential that slaves saw in these objects.

The story is similar with respect to healing. Black healers- not all of whom identified as Conjurers themselves- could supposedly cure and prevent anything from arthritis to whooping cough and, additionally, provide physical and mental strength and good luck through charm bags. While many of their remedies were herbal, we see once again the pragmatic nature of Conjure in the non-herbal remedies and preventions that Puckett describes:

A buckeye carried in the pocket will surely bring one good luck, as will also mole-paws worn around the neck. The silver coin, so effective in warding off conjuration, is equally effective in bringing good luck when tied around the leg or worn in a necklace about the neck. A silver ring is also efficient, as is also a ring

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 19b

<sup>96</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 102

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 101

made of a horseshoe nail or a ring with Chinese writing on it- all of which I have seen worn by Mississippi Negroes for this purpose. The red foot of a jay bird kept on the person is said to achieve the same result. Nutmeg worn about the neck is said to be very lucky.<sup>98</sup>

It is clear that black healers made use of many different objects in their attempts to heal and prevent misfortune among their clients. Indeed, many of their remedies were interdisciplinary in nature, representing “a convergence of spiritual beliefs, supernatural traditions, and practical techniques in black healing practices.”<sup>99</sup> For instance, many slaves preferred black healers who worked with herbs and roots to traditionally-trained white doctors, partially because these doctors were often overtly hostile to blacks and partially because Conjurers and “root doctors” shared slaves’ conceptions of suffering and healing as both physical and spiritual matters.<sup>100</sup> Thus, just as Conjure itself filled in the gaps that Christianity left behind, black healing practices addressed questions that the white medical canon left unanswered.<sup>101</sup>

Black healers, even when they used natural remedies, had to tap in to the popular slave notion of pragmatic, causal healing in order to satisfy their clients. If a woman was in need of contraception, a root doctor may have given her “a mixture of gunpowder mixed with sweet milk,” or told her to “get some ‘black haw’ roots...brew this into a tea, dropping in a small piece of bluestone while it is boiling, and...in another bottle put some tea prepared from ‘Red Shanks’ roots mixed with red pepper and a teaspoon of gunpowder.”<sup>102</sup> She would have been told to drink

---

<sup>98</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 314

<sup>99</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 93

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

<sup>102</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 332

a bit from both bottles each time the moon entered a new phase, and, if she followed the steps correctly, would not conceive. Similarly, a woman in labor may have been given “tea made from the clay of dirt-dauber’s nests, or from ashes” to relieve the pain of childbirth.<sup>103</sup> One particular Conjuror, an informant of Puckett, reported seeing a vision of an angel when he was gravely ill. The angel instructed him to use dust to cure himself, since man was originally made of dust. The “dust” ended up taking the form of earthworms: “Earthworms are the life of dust, therefore fry the earthworms in lard and use the mixture as a salve. He did so and, according to his story, was immediately healed.”<sup>104</sup>

These examples are only a few of the many available, but they all demonstrate the intimacy, specificity, and practicality of black American healing at the time. For each affliction, there was both an underlying- often spiritual- cause, as well as a natural remedy that tapped into popular slave notions of affliction and healing and was believed to produce a direct, observable effect. By drawing on this collective medical consciousness, black healers re-appropriated the bodily agency that slavery had stolen from them.

While the examples mentioned above are relatively straightforward, many Conjure recipes were incredibly complex and required that practitioners complete multiple steps with considerable precision and attention to detail in order to produce the intended effect. For example, Puckett writes of one spell that was meant to cause someone to fall in love: “Get as many hairs from the girl’s head as she is years old, and carry them in the upper left vest pocket; or pick up some dirt from her foot track, mix it with the dirt from your own, tie in a piece of red flannel, and wet with the juice from a red onion. Carry this in your left vest pocket, and she will

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 333

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 362-3

surely be yours.”<sup>105</sup> Another example is a curing procedure for someone who has been afflicted by malevolent Conjure, which “consists of clay from around the mouth of a crawfish hole, mixed with dirt from a red ant’s hole and thoroughly wet with whiskey or camphor. To this add water in which angle-worms have been boiled. Rub the conjured person with this and his trouble will soon vanish.”<sup>106</sup> It should come as no surprise that many slaves approached their Conjure doctor with complaints that their charm did not work, only to be told that they had not correctly followed the steps of the spell.

Such complicated steps only served to legitimate Conjure even further in the minds of the slaves. Indeed, if one is attempting to conjure another slave, it can always be argued that “if the man dies, this black art has worked; if he fails to die then he himself has a fetish stronger than the spirit that was trying to induce his death.”<sup>107</sup> Failures, in other words, can easily be explained away: either the intended victim used a stronger counteractive charm or the practitioner did not perform all of the prescribed steps correctly. In a word, Conjure never seemed to actually fail, because failures were blamed on the tools with which Conjure was performed rather than the supernatural power of Conjure itself. Supposed failures were acceptable as long as a slave’s faith in Conjure as a body of knowledge remained intact.

This allowed Conjurers some leeway in distributing charm bags and explaining their uses to clients. Indeed, many of them knew quite well that another, supposedly stronger, charm would often placate a frustrated client, regardless of the outcome. Puckett even mentions one Conjurer in Louisiana who is reported to have said: “It is amusing to see how easily satisfied they are with an explanation if they come back claiming to have failed, invariably paying a larger sum to get a

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 266

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 299

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 176

better hand.”<sup>108</sup> Again, the complexity of the steps of many Conjure recipes only served to reinforce popular faith in Conjure itself. When a spell fails, one’s trust in that particular spell may be eroded, but one’s trust in Conjure remains thoroughly intact as long as there are other charms that one expects to work: “In many cases failure was legitimated by the internal dynamics of the system, which provide a coherent, self-sustaining explanation.”<sup>109</sup>

From where did these beliefs about healing and harming come? Robert Voeks, who writes of African medical practices and the ways in which they changed as a result of the slave trade, points to shamans, who “in their role as brokers between the material and spiritual universes, seek out the other-world sources of physical and emotional distress...Cures...are most often effected through votive offerings to the ancestors and spirits, observance of taboos, fasting and seclusion, trance, and prescription of medical plants”<sup>110</sup> Voeks suggests that the idea of a person who acts as a mediator between the supernatural and physical realms in many West African cultures translated well into the role of the African-American Conjuror.

Of course, we should not be so hasty as to equate the African shaman and the African-American Conjuror; however, we can tease out certain overlaps in the duties of these practitioners. Both shamans and Conjurors use pieces of the natural world, such as roots and powders, to intervene in the welfare of their clients. They serve as the bridges that connect their communities to the powers of supernatural work. Moreover, like the shamans that Voeks discusses, Conjurors recognize the powerful role that the supernatural plays in one’s physical wellbeing, a vestige of the holistic worldview of pre-colonial West African tribes. Indeed, in the antebellum south, diseases and misfortune were often thought to be the result of malevolent

---

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 210

<sup>109</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 206

<sup>110</sup> Robert Voeks, “African Medicine and Magic in the Americas,” *Geographical Review* 83, no. 1 (Jan. 1993): 69

Conjure, and often only a Conjurer could negate the spell's effects. The prevalence of such harmful magic illustrates many slaves' "distinctive ideas concerning sickness, its causes, and cures. Affliction expressed disorder in the physical body and conflict in the social body."<sup>111</sup>

These overlaps between the African shaman and the African-American Conjurer illuminate my previous comments about the cultural worldview that slaves brought across the Atlantic Ocean. The role of the Conjurer maps quite well onto the community practitioner that was present in many African societies and can thus be read to represent some continuity between African supernatural practices and African-American beliefs about Conjure. It is in this way that "African tradition...gave rise to a new and original form" of supernaturalism, largely centered on healing and harming, within the plantation societies.<sup>112</sup>

Through the methods described above, slaves used Conjure as a weapon by which they exacted revenge on enemies through disease and physical discomfort; at the same time, Conjure also served as a remedy for these aggressive forces and provided a sort of haven in which black healing practices could develop and flourish. Thus, slaves adapted Conjure as a subversive force that provided them a degree of pragmatic, physical power in an environment that continually attempted to strip them of all influence. By allowing slaves to take back their ability to mediate interpersonal conflicts through harm and protect themselves through healing, Conjure "intersected with the social and cultural forces that shaped black Americans' lives."<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 92

<sup>112</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 527

<sup>113</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 118



## Chapter V: Conjurers, Slave Preachers, and Godly Magic

Having examined Conjure as a subversive tool that allowed slaves to both cause and alleviate suffering, I now turn my attention to the relationship between Conjure and Christianity in the slave quarters. Chireau presents multiple examples of the “kinship” that “emerged between supernaturalism and slave Christianity” in the South as slaves encountered the supernaturalism of the slave-owners.<sup>114</sup> It is particularly important to emphasize the idea that within slave communities, “the authority of Conjurers and the authority of [black] Christian ministers often overlapped, and many blacks found their functions to be complementary.”<sup>115</sup> In this way, slaves subverted the institutionalized- and often pro-slavery- brand of religion that they found in white churches by integrating it into African notions of supernatural power, thus blurring the lines between European supernaturalism and Conjure and illuminating the idea that the two fields, which much of Western scholarship has traditionally seen as mutually exclusive, often “relied on each other.”<sup>116</sup>

This partnership between African and European supernaturalism, unlike the pragmatic healing and harming practices mentioned above, did not always produce causal effects or create an arena for the negotiation of interpersonal conflicts. Rather, it gave slaves a hope for the future and the afterlife, in which they would be freed from bondage. It is in this sense that I discuss the non-pragmatic side of Conjure in what follows, as opposed to the pragmatic practices of Conjurers and other black healers above.

---

<sup>114</sup> Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity”, 229

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 230

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

The importance of religion was well documented throughout the slave period in the form of slave preachers, who were “the true shepherd[s] of the black flock.”<sup>117</sup> They were able to unite their churchgoers because they were usually educated enough to read and understand the Bible but still able to relate to the daily plights of the slaves because they were slaves themselves. Their sermons, preferred by the slaves to those of white preachers, were characterized by “vivid phrase, folk poetry, and picturesque words” that aroused the emotions and united the slaves into one spiritual body.<sup>118</sup> Naturally, as black preachers were often under the strict supervision of slave-owners and other local whites, many of them served as unintentional mouthpieces for the pro-slavery rhetoric of white preachers out of fear that they would be whipped or otherwise punished should they deviate from the authorized message. Other black preachers, “a small minority, reading the Bible literally, apparently sincerely believed that obeying their masters was one of the ways slaves would get to Heaven,” although they were relatively few.<sup>119</sup>

Also well documented were the myriad ways in which black preachers incorporated African-derived practices into their sermons to produce a syncretic lens of spiritual experience that allowed slaves to draw near to each other and discretely articulate critiques of the slave society. One prominent example is the ring shout, a black spiritual dance and ecstatic religious experience that represents one way in which “the African heritage of dance found expression in the evangelical religion of the American slaves.”<sup>120</sup> Found primarily in and around the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, the ring shout was described by folklorists John and Alan Lomax as follows:

---

<sup>117</sup> Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 131

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 132

<sup>120</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 72

...(1) the song is ‘danced’ with the whole body, with hands, feet, belly, and hips; (2) the worship is, basically, a dancing-singing phenomenon; (3) the dancers always move counter-clockwise around the ring; (4) the song has the leader-chorus form, with much repetition, with a focus on rhythm rather than on melody; that is, with a form that invites and ultimately enforces cooperative group activity; (5) the song continues to be repeated from sometimes more than an hour, steadily increasing in intensity and gradually accelerating, until a sort of mass hypnosis ensues... This shout pattern is demonstrably West African in origin.<sup>121</sup>

Although the ring shout was widely condemned by white Protestants who believed dancing and loud worship to be sinful, it is undeniable that its pattern, movements, and collective nature are derived from West African dances. This ecstatic religious practice allowed slaves to process the daily torment of slavery and hope for its eventual end, as did one slave preacher who, filled with joy in one particular gathering, is reported to have cried that he desired to be “‘free indeed, free from death, free from hell, free from work, free from white folks, free from everything.’”<sup>122</sup>

Conjure played a significant role in these instances and allowed slaves to retain a sense of personal agency and not be completely dependent on the slave-owners.<sup>123</sup> Consider a Kentucky slave named William Webb, who “prepared special bags of roots for other blacks to carry in order ‘to keep peace’ between masters and slaves on local plantations.”<sup>124</sup> Indeed, Webb himself mentions in his autobiography making twelve packets containing roots that he had collected, which he gave to fellow slaves with these instructions: “I told them every morning when they got up, to shake those bags in the direction of their master’s house and say, Lord peace be with us

---

<sup>121</sup> John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Folk Song U.S.A* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), 335

<sup>122</sup> Quoted. in Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 137

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 109

<sup>124</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 14

this day...<sup>125</sup> Webb sees no inconsistency in his perception of a religious element in root work, and he is not alone. Chireau mentions an anthropologist's account of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mississippi “‘Voodoo doctors’ who were also well-known ‘Reverends’ whose ministries were supported by members of the community,”<sup>126</sup> causing the anthropologist to remark: “[T]hose who are devoutly religious are also devout believers in current folk superstitions, and do not look upon Christianity and voodoo as conflicting in any way.”<sup>127</sup>

The historical record is replete with similar examples of black Americans who straddled the line between supernaturalism and religion, most especially because religion, in many cases, could not address all of the issues about which slaves were concerned. The supernaturalism of the slave-owners, in the form of Christianity, was relatively passive with respect to supernatural occurrences. If one experiences an unexpected stroke of luck, a Christian explanation would attribute the fortune to God's will rather than to any effort on the part of the practitioner. Alternatively, if one experiences misfortune, one who acknowledges the omniscience of God must accept his will with little room for question.

Conjure departs from this framework in taking a more active role, a sense of agency, in affecting the world. Thus, Conjurers and their clients could confront social and interpersonal conflicts directly rather than passively accepting circumstances as part of God's plan. This agency was especially important in the antebellum years, when slaves had very little control over their schedules, personal liberties, and even their own bodies. In this sense, Conjure allowed slaves to approach conflicts in a different, more dynamic way than did Christianity alone. As

---

<sup>125</sup> William Webb. *The History of William Webb, Composed by Himself*. (Detroit: Egbert Hoekstra, 1873), 22. From the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Documenting the American South*.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity,” 231

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*.

Katrina Hazzard-Donald writes, “The harshness of the American system of enslavement coupled with Christianity’s limited responsiveness intensified the slave’s need for additional supernatural African assistance.”<sup>128</sup> While Christianity gave slaves a hope for the afterlife, it did not address the realities of everyday life in the plantations. It is this hole that Conjurers sought to fill with their services.

Let us consider more examples from history. An informant of Puckett mentioned a formula for besting an enemy: “mix a pound of sugar and some powdered coonroot in a newspaper, put this into a vessel, go into a room by yourself, and set the vessel on the fire.”<sup>129</sup> After that, the practitioner is to recite a rather long chant that involves the repetition of “Oh Lord, Good Shepherd.”<sup>130</sup> This Louisiana hoodoo doctor is not alone in his mixing of supernatural work and Christian doctrine. A similar example comes from Missouri, where a Charles Leland bought a luck charm that was prepared with a prayer that God grant him good luck and “bind down all devils...under his feet.”<sup>131</sup>

Not all instances of this partnership between Christianity and Conjure were so pragmatic; indeed, vestiges of African supernaturalism appear in many aspects of slave religion in the plantation period. Some slaves related visions of heaven that involved Jesus plowing in a field while his wife- “Mrs. God”- sews his pants inside.<sup>132</sup> Thus, according to Puckett, “the golden streets of the Negro have at least a small sprinkling of common earth, and...their heaven is at

---

<sup>128</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald. *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 64.

<sup>129</sup> Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 562

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 562-3

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 542

least somewhat related to the African other-world, which is built entirely in terms of this world.”<sup>133</sup> Another account argues that “Jesus, while on earth, was always ‘mighty fond of cullud folks’” and created cats in response to a black woman whose house was infested with mice.<sup>134</sup> On the opposite end, many slaves believed that one could make a pact with the devil by “tak[ing] a black cat bone and a guitar and go[ing] to a lonely fork in the roads at midnight.”<sup>135</sup>

That many slaves with dual appointments in the realms of Conjure and Christianity saw no conflict between the two is due largely to the fact that “hoodoo filled a separate niche in their spiritual world,” a niche that religion simply could not fill.<sup>136</sup> Slave preachers held authority over the soul, but Conjurers harnessed the supernatural to produce observable effects in the material world. A preacher could reveal the way to salvation, but only a Conjuror (who, as we have seen, often doubled as a preacher) could foresee the future, counteract malevolent charms, and exact revenge by way of disease and misfortune. Christianity, despite its widespread influence, was not enough. It is because of this inability of Christianity to act as a “utilitarian, pragmatic spirituality” that history reveals people like Uncle Aaron, a black preacher in Virginia “who exhorted believers to follow God from the pulpit, while raising evil spirits outside the walls of the church.”<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 542-3

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 556

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 554

<sup>136</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 79

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, enslaved Africans in the United States developed a syncretic system of spiritual experience that was heavily informed by both African and European supernaturalism, the former in the form of African notions of spirituality that survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the latter in the form of the Protestantism of slave-owners. Due to strict religious policing in the public sphere, this system of experience developed primarily in private spaces like the slave quarters, where slaves could freely worship and attempt to make sense of their enslavement.

Inherent in this African-American system is pragmatic element called Conjure, a causal, spiritual tool that authors like Jeffrey E. Anderson have represented as an arbiter between institutionalized religion and common supernatural beliefs. In a pragmatic sense, slaves relied on Conjure to affect both their own wellbeing and that of others in an attempt to empower themselves in the face of a slave economy that had undermined their authority to heal and harm. Conjure also formed an important part of the non-pragmatic religious life of slaves, many of whom incorporated Conjure and other African-derived traditions into their Christianity. In short, Conjure drew on both African and European supernatural traditions and touched on both pragmatic and non-pragmatic aspects of the slave experience.

This allowed a select group of slaves- Conjurers- to accumulate considerable influence among their peers, who viewed them as vessels for the practical power of the supernatural realm and thus understood them to be uniquely positioned to provide assistance in interpersonal conflicts. Conjurers used pieces of the natural world such as herbs, roots, and dirt, as well as common items like flannel and photographs, to intervene in the fates of their clients, healing the effects of malevolent Conjure and often turning it back against its originator. The authority that

Conjurers commanded among the slaves was quite safe from erosion because when a charm bag or recipe seemed to fail, it could always be argued that the intended victim had an even stronger charm that had rendered the original impotent, or that one had not performed the ritual correctly. In this way, Conjure was a self-sustaining folk tradition that purported to give slaves the ability to produce small, pragmatic, observable changes in themselves and their peers, thus giving them opportunities that Christianity alone could not offer.

While many Western scholars see religion and causal supernatural work as mutually exclusive, it is well documented that southern blacks often moved between Christianity and Conjure with ease. Slave preachers such as Uncle Aaron and William Webb nourished the souls of their flocks while simultaneously tapping into the supernatural to produce peace between master and slave and send snakes into the bodies of their enemies. A Louisiana Conjurer and Christian named Eulalia refused to “be rottin’ people’s teeths out, and fillin’ folks wid snakes and lizards and spiders and things like dat” due to her religious beliefs.<sup>138</sup> A Florida slave named Henry Abraham became a Conjurer after experiencing an “awakening” that closely resembled a religious call to action, after which he told his wife: “Honey, I jes’ can’t do dis yere work; I has a feelin’ God’s done called his chile for higher things.”<sup>139</sup> The examples are many, but the message is the same: for many slaves, European supernaturalism alone, with its non-pragmatic focus on moral uprightness and the afterlife, did not sufficiently address the immediate issues with which they grappled on a daily basis. Conjure was a pragmatic tool that, far from being the inverse of religion, actually served as its complement.

There still remain several pressing questions to which future research could respond. Namely, how has Conjure been Westernized and commercialized in the modern US and other

---

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 187

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in Chireau, *Black Magic*, 23



countries of the Western world? I suspect that part of the answer lies in the modern horror trope of the voodoo doll, which points to the West's historical misunderstanding of Haitian Vodou and its frequent equation of that religious tradition with Conjure; it also harkens to Frazer's concept of magical similarity, as discussed above. It would be beneficial for future researchers to explore the current relationship between Conjure and Vodou in the Western popular consciousness. Similarly, what social, political, and economic factors have led to the relative disappearance of Conjure in the modern world, at least in the way in which it functioned in the plantation societies? To what extent has the "old traditional black belt Hoodoo" discussed throughout this thesis been displaced by what Hazzard-Donald calls "marketed Hoodoo," a modern attempt to exploit vestiges of the Southern conjuring tradition for profit?<sup>140</sup>

Clearly, much more work needs to be done to completely treat the topic of black American spirituality generally and Conjure specifically. Regardless, I believe that the aspects of my analysis presented above can give us a better understanding of the covert development of slave religion in the Antebellum south and the role that Conjure as a subversive tool of empowerment played in slaves' experiences with the pragmatic tasks of healing and harming as well as their non-pragmatic Christian religiosity. Magic and religion, it would appear, may not be as discordant as has traditionally been believed.

---

<sup>140</sup> *Mojo Workin'*, 15-6

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Jeffrey E. *Conjure in African American Society*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.
- . *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008.
- Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Brown, G.C. Interview with Guy Carawan. FT-3610: Tape 2 of 2, in the Guy and Candie Carawan Collection #20008, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Butler, Grace L. Chavis. *Africa : Religions and Culture, with a Focus on the Ashanti People*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Dorrance Publishing Co., 1994
- Chireau, Yvonne Patricia. *Black Magic: Religion and the African-American Conjuring Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- . "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 225-46.
- Dasaolu, Babajide, and Demilade Oyelakun. "The concept of evil in Yoruba and Igbo thoughts: Some Comparisons." *Philosophia: E-Journal of Philosophy and Culture*.  
<http://philosophy-e.com/the-concept-of-evil-in-yoruba-and-igbo-thoughts-some-comparisons/>.
- Fanthorpe, Lionel, and Patricia Fanthorpe. *Mysteries and Secrets of Voodoo, Santeria, and Obeah*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2008. Print.

- Frazer, Sir James G. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. N.p.: Temple of Earth Publishing, 1922. <http://www.templeofearth.com/books/goldenbough.pdf>.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Shocken Books, 1963), 16
- Fulop, Timothy E., and Albert J. Raboteau, eds. *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll; the World the Slaves Made*. [1st ed.]. Pantheon Books, 1974.
- Giraldo, Alexander. "Religion and Resistance: Obeah: The Ultimate Resistance ." University of Miami. <http://scholar.library.miami.edu/slaves/Religion/religion.html>.
- Harding, Vincent. "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Slaves, 1800-1860", in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- Harris, Shawnya. "Nkisi Nkondi, Kongo people." Khan Academy. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/central-africa/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/a/nkisi-nkondi>.
- Hazzard-Donald, Katrina. *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Hepburn, Sharon Roger. "Conjure." *The Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery*. Edited by Junius P. Rodriguez. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 1997. 187.
- Hurston, Zora N. *Mules and Men*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: a Definition*. S.C.M. Press, 1973.
- Kingsley, Mary H. *Travels in West Africa: Congo Français, Corisco, and Cameroons*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897.

- Larson, Jennifer L. "A Rebellion to Remember: The Legacy of Nat Turner." *Documenting the American South*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, n.d. Web. 5 Oct. 2005. [www.docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/turner.html](http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/turner.html)
- Lomax, John A. and Alan Lomax, *Folk Song U.S.A* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947).
- Mintz, Sidney Wilfred, and Richard Price. *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Mintz, Steven. "Facts About the Slave Trade and Slavery." The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Web. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/facts-about-slave-trade-and-slavery>.
- Powdermaker, Hortense. *After Freedom; a Cultural Study in the Deep South*. Atheneum, 1968.
- Puckett, Newbell Niles. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. S.I.: Kessinger Pub., 2003.
- Raboteau, Albert J. "The Black Experience in American Evangelicalism: The Meaning of Slavery." In *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, edited by Timothy Earl Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, 89-104. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- . *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Santeria Church of the Orishas. "Orishas." Web. <http://santeriachurch.org/the-orishas/>
- Shen, Kona. "Haitian Revolution Begins: August-September 1791." Brown University Department of Africana Studies. 1876. <http://library.brown.edu/haitihistory/5.html>
- Turner, Nat. "The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, V.A." *Documenting the American South*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries. n.d. 2 Jan. 2016. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>

- Voeks, Robert. "African Medicine and Magic in the Americas." *Geographical Review* 83, no. 1 (January 1993): 66-78. Accessed November 5, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/215381>.
- Webb, William. *The History of William Webb, Composed by Himself*. (Detroit: Egbert Hoekstra, 1873), 22. From the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Documenting the American South*. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/webb/webb.html>
- Welbourn, F B. "The Idea of a High God in Three East African Societies." *Nurelweb: The Cults and Religion Website*. University of Calgary, 1964. Web. 7 Oct. 2015.