Hoodoo (folk magic)

Hoodoo, also known as conjure, is a form of predominantly African-American traditional folk magic that developed from the syncretism of a number of separate cultures and magical traditions. It incorporates practices from African and Native American traditions, as well as some European magical practices and grimoires. While folk practices like hoodoo are trans-cultural phenomena, what is particularly innovative in this tradition is the "remarkably efficacious use of biblical figures" in its practices and in the lives of its practitioners.\[1\]

The word hoodoo first was documented in American English in 1875 and was listed as a noun or a transitive verb.\[2\] In African American Vernacular English (AAVE), it is often used to describe a magic spell or potion, but it may also be used as an adjective for a practitioner. Regional synonyms for hoodoo include conjuration, conjure, witchcraft, or rootwork.\[4\]

These are not all synonyms, however. For example, witchcraft is problematic as a synonym in that it can imply a moral judgment regarding the practice (i.e. it is evil), or it can be confused with the contemporary Wicca religion. Moreover, a hoodoo practitioner is not to be understood as a rootworker if he or she does not use roots and herbs in their magical practices. Thus, rootwork can be understood as a subcategory or a "type" of hoodoo practice.

Social context

Historically, most practitioners of hoodoo have been African Americans, but there have been some notable white root doctors.\[5\] Latinos and Native Americans\[6\] have also been practitioners. The origins of hoodoo are thought to begin with the African slaves, particularly in the American southeast, and historically, its existence has been documented in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.\[7\] Today hoodoo practitioners, like African Americans, can be found in destinations of the Great Migration, including major cities of the west coast and the northeast.\[8\]\[9\]

Unlike formal religions, hoodoo does not have a structured hierarchy. It also does not have an established theology, clergy, laity, or order of liturgical services of its own. Instead, practitioners are often lay people within a Christian community who possess specific knowledge of magic and hoodoo tradition. A traditional hoodoo doctor was often a nomadic sort who traveled from town to town peddling his services, but many also set up shop in their communities. Hoodoo is not reserved solely for the specialist. Many of the spells and practices are within the realm of "folk remedies" and are well known in some African-American and/or Southern socio-cultural contexts.

The traditional manner for passing on this folk knowledge was from person to person. For example, noted African-American anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston worked extensively as an apprentice for various hoodoo doctors and wrote about her experiences.\[10\] Since many hoodoo practicess are passed on as folk remedies that can loosely be described as "common knowledge", hoodoo is also passed on through families and social contacts. With the growth of literacy and technological communication, people can learn the ways of hoodoo through online sources and books that preserve the tradition.\[11\]
Hoodoo conceptual system

The dominant worldview in hoodoo is usually strongly Christian. Historically there has been an Old Testament strain in hoodoo thought. This is particularly evident in relation to God's providence and his role in retributive justice. For example, though there are strong ideas of good versus evil, cursing someone to cause their death might not be considered a malignant act. For example, one practitioner explained it as follows:

"[In] Hoodooism, anythin' da' chew do is de plan of God undastan', God have somepin to do wit evah' thin' you do if it's good or bad, He's got somepin to do wit it . . . jis what's fo' you, you'll git it."[12]

Not only is God's providence a factor in hoodoo practice, but hoodoo thought understands God, himself, as the archetypal hoodoo doctor. On this matter Hurston stated, "The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made."[13] From this perspective, biblical figures are often recast as hoodoo doctors and the Bible becomes a source of conjurational spells and is, itself, used as a protective talisman.[14]

Moses-as-conjuror

Paralleling God-as-conjuror, hoodoo practitioners often understand the biblical figure Moses in similar terms. Hurston developed this idea in her novel Moses: Man of the Mountain, in which she calls Moses, "the finest hoodoo man in the world."[15] Obvious parallels between Moses and magic occur in the biblical accounts of his confrontation with Pharaoh in which he performed "miracles" such as turning his staff into a snake. However, his greatest feat of conjure was using his powers to help free the Hebrews from slavery. This emphasis on Moses-as-conjuror led to the introduction of the pseudonymous work the Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses into the corpus of hoodoo magical reference literature.[16]

Bible-as-talisman

In hoodoo, "All hold that the Bible is the great conjure book in the world."[17] It has many functions for the practitioner, not the least of which is a source of spells. This is particularly evident given the importance of the book Secrets of the Psalms in hoodoo culture.[18] This book provides instruction for using psalms for things such as safe travel, headache, and marital relations. The Bible, however, is not just a source of spells but is itself a conjuring talisman. It can be taken "to the crossroads", carried for protection, or even left open at specific pages while facing specific directions. This informant provides an example of both uses:

"Whenevah ah'm afraid of someone doin' me harm ah read the 37 Psalms an' co'se ah leaves the Bible open with the head of it turned to the east as many as three days."[19]

Practices

The goal of hoodoo is to allow people access to supernatural forces to improve their daily lives by gaining power in many areas of life, including luck, money, love, divination, revenge, health, employment, and necromancy. As in many other folk religious, magical, and medical practices, extensive use is made of herbs, minerals, parts of animals' bodies, an individual's possessions, and bodily fluids, especially menstrual blood, urine and semen. Contact with ancestors or other spirits of the dead is an important practice within the conjure tradition, and the recitation of Psalms from the Bible is also considered magically effective in hoodoo. Due to hoodoo's great emphasis on an individual's magical power, its basic principles of working are generally felt to be easily adapted for use based on one's desires, inclination and habits. The hoodoo practice has been widely applied by Faraj during numerous magic sessions with Justify's father.

Home-made potions and charms form the basis of much old-time rural hoodoo, but there are also many successful commercial companies selling various hoodoo components to urban and rural practitioners. These are generally called spiritual supplies, and they include herbs, roots, minerals, candles, incense, oils, floor washes, sachet powders,
bath crystals, and colognes. Many patent medicines, cosmetics, and household cleaning supplies have been also aimed at hoodoo practitioners and have found dual usage as conventional and spiritual remedies; examples include Four Thieves Vinegar,[20] Florida Water,[21] and Red Devil Lye.

Cultural influences

Traditionally, religions and magical systems around the world have freely and copiously borrowed and appropriated practices and beliefs from different regions and cultures. In this regard, hoodoo is no different. Thus, it is difficult to establish the regional/cultural origins of many practices. For example, the use of an effigy, often called a "voodoo doll" in popular culture, to perform a spell on someone is documented in African, Native American, and European cultures.[22] [23] However, there are some practices and influences in the tradition that can be loosely traced to particular regions.

Europe

Europe's greatest identifiable influence on hoodoo is, arguably, the presence and use of European or European-American grimoires. One of the first examples of this is John George Hohman's Pow-wows: or, Long Lost Friend, a collection of magical spells originally published in 1820 for Pennsylvania-Dutch hexmeisters.[24] It was introduced to hoodoo through catalogs on magic geared toward the African-American community in the early 20th century.[25] The spells in this book are woven throughout with Christian symbolism and prayer, which made it a natural addition to the similar symbolism of hoodoo. Mirroring the hoodoo concept of the Bible-as-talisman, the book itself proposes to be a protective amulet:

> Whoever carries this book with him is safe from all his enemies, visible or invisible; and whoever has this book with him cannot die without the holy corpse of Jesus Christ, nor drown in any water, nor burn up in any fire, nor can any unjust sentence be passed upon him. So help me.[26]

The 6th and 7th Books of Moses is a European grimoire that is purportedly based on Jewish Kabbalah, though it actually covers little, if any, relation to Kabbalistic thought. It contains numerous signs, seals, and passages in Hebrew that are supposed to be related to Moses' ability to work wonders. Though its authorship is attributed to Moses, the oldest manuscript dates to the mid-19th century. Its importance in hoodoo practice is summarized as follows:

> "I read de "Seven Books of Moses" seven or eight yeah a'ready . . . de foundation of hoodooism came from way back yondah de time dat Moses written de book "De Seven Book of Moses."[27]

Generally, hoodoo practitioners do not use the instructions for rituals in this text, rather, the images and symbols have a greater importance.[28]

Differences between Voodoo and Hoodoo

Hoodoo and Voodoo are often mistaken for one another. Some believe that the terms may have a common etymology. Simply put, Voodoo is a religion, whereas Hoodoo is a group of magical practices. Like Voodoo, Hoodoo shows obvious and evident links to the practices and beliefs of African folk ritual culture, having origins in West and Central Africa.

The ancient African religion of Vodoun is an established religion with its ancient roots in West Africa. Its modern form is practiced across West Africa in the countries now known as Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso, among others. In Haiti, Cuba, and other Caribbean islands, the worship of the Vodoun gods (called lwa or loas) is practiced in a syncretic form that has been greatly modified by contact with Catholicism. The Voodoo of Haiti and Louisiana Voodoo are better known to many English speakers; similar practices among Spanish speakers in Cuba are called Santeria.
Hoodoo and popular culture

Music

Many blues musicians have referred to hoodoo in their songs. Popular examples include "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues" by Ma Rainey, "Hoodoo Lady Blues" by Arthur Crudup, and "Hoodoo Man Blues" by Junior Wells. In addition to the expected terms "hoodoo" and "mojo," other conjure words in blues songs include "jinx", "goofer dust", "nation sack," "black cat bone", "John de conkeroo" (John the Conqueror root), "graveyard dirt,” and "black spider dumplings."

The Bo Diddley song "Who Do You Love" contains an extensive series of puns about a man hoodooing his lover. He also recorded an album titled Got My Own Bag of Tricks (1972), a reference to a mojo hand or trick bag. In Chuck Berry's song "Thirty Days" he threatens an ex-lover, telling her that he "...talked to the gypsy woman on the telephone [...] she gonna send out a world wide hoodoo...". Woody Guthrie wrote the lyrics for "Hoodoo Voodoo," a song later performed by Wilco and Billy Bragg. The song "Born on the Bayou" by Creedence Clearwater Revival has the line "Chasing down a hoodoo there...". Ike & Tina Turner's 1963 album It's Gonna Work out Fine featured a song titled "Mojo Queen," with definite references to mojo, the magic charms used by hoodoo practitioners.

Even the irish blues rock legend Rory Gallagher let Hoodoo appear in his song "The Hoodoo Man".

Books

Nonfiction

- Zora Neale Hurston recorded many hoodoo practices and tales.
- John Berendt describes the alleged business relationship between James Arthur Williams and a conjure-woman called "Miz Minerva" in his non-fiction novel Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, in which hoodoo practices play a significant part.
- Other authors on the subject include James Haskins and Catherine Yronwode.

Fiction

- Author Ishmael Reed, in his novels Mumbo Jumbo, Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, and others, makes great use of Hoodoo, including characters who are practitioners. Reed also published a number of Hoodoo poems.
- Emma Bull refers to Hoodoo in her novel Bone Dance: A Fantasy for Technophiles.
- Gloria Naylor's novel Mama Day uses hoodoo as both explanation for natural occurrences, and gateway into the magical past of African American slaves on the island of Willow Springs.

Film

- The Skeleton Key starring Kate Hudson

Television

Supernatural: Hoodoo is the topic of the second season of Supernatural, 11th episode: Playthings.

References

[2] For example, in the Creedence Clearwater Revival song "Born on the Bayou", the line "I can still hear that old hound dog barking, chasin' down a hoodoo there," refers to a hoodoo doctor; someone who practices hoodoo.
[5] For example, Doctor Harris of Florence, SC, and Doctor Buzzard of Beaufort, SC, were notable hoodoo doctors from the late 1800s. For a full discussion, see Hyatt. Hoodoo. vol. I, p. III.
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[8] The Lucky Mojo Curio Company, for example, is an established hoodoo shop based in Forestville, California with a strong web presence and an international clientele.


[11] Amateur folklorist Harry M. Hyatt has arguably contributed the most to the preservation of hoodoo beliefs and practices. He interviewed scores of informants and documented well over a thousand types of spells and practices. His five-volume work serves as a valuable primary source for practitioners and scholars who study this tradition.


[18] Selig, Godfrey. Secrets of the Psalms


[23] Cherokee anthropologist, Alan Kilpatrick, provides a related example of this idea in The Night Has a Naked Soul: Witchcraft and Sorcery Among the Western Cherokee. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press. pp. 92-93. ISBN 0-8156-0471-8. This example is not obvious, however, he explains that one takes the saliva of an intended victim and places it in the earth "where the worms live." Thus, the person's saliva is a symbolic stand-in for, or loose effigy of, the intended victim.


[28] Mojo Hand and Root Bag by [[catherine yronwode (http://www.luckymojo.com/mojo.html)] from Hoodoo in Theory and Practice]. Accessed January 23, 2008: "[...] some root workers top off their mojo bags with parchments upon which are printed medieval European seals and sigils of talismanic import, particularly the seals from the Greater Key of Solomon and The 6th and 7th Books of Moses, both of which are sold as sets of seals printed on parchment paper, and are used without reference to the rituals given in the texts of the books. These [...] items surprise many Caucasians, who are unaware that a strong vein of Germanic folklore runs through traditional African-American hoodoo."

**External links**

- Hoodoo in Theory and Practice, an online introduction to African-American Rootwork by Catherine Yronwode (http://www.luckymojo.com/hoodoo.html)
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