3-1-2005

Black Magic: Religion And The African American Conjuring Tradition

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Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition
Author(s): Yvonne P. Chireau
Published by: University of California Press
Accessed: 04-04-2016 17:33 UTC

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Scholars of African American religions increasingly recognize the importance of non-Christian religious forms and traditions in African American history and contemporary African American social and cultural life, but we need books like *Black Magic* to help us plot out those forms and traditions in detail. Yvonne P. Chireau, a religious studies professor at Swarthmore College, defines one of these non-Christian African American traditions—conjure—as a magical worldview of healers and witches, amulets and lizards. Conjure was supernaturally oriented and ethically relative. It understood the cosmos to be infused at all levels with power that was neither good nor evil, but available to the trained conjurer.

The parallels with traditions of the African diaspora, like Santería and Vodou, are obvious, although they remain largely unexamined in *Black Magic*. But one book cannot do everything, and this book manages quite well to convey the complexity of conjure in African American history, as well as conjure’s relationship with Christianity from the antebellum period through the twentieth century. In the first chapter following the introduction, Chireau depicts the ways that conjure and Christianity intertwinced in slave culture. Conjure helped slaves to preserve some sense of control over their lives by enabling them, through magic, to take revenge on white owners who misused them. Both conjure and Christianity involved a spiritual power perceived as real and tangible in the individual slave’s daily life, and the symbols of both traditions frequently overlapped in conjure language and ritual practice.

In chapter two, Chireau explores the African sources of conjure, providing a fascinating addition to ongoing debates about Africanisms, or the persistence of African cultures in African American history. Chireau argues that conjure preserved many Africanisms, well past the date when slaves were brought from Africa to the United States. In chapter three, Chireau delves into the methods of harming available to
the conjurer. For Chireau, the harmful aspects of conjure provide an entrée into the social world of slave culture. The means that slaves found to harm one another through conjure, she argues, indicate the tensions and boundaries within African American slave communities. In chapter four, Chireau reviews healing practices central to much of conjure. They were also central to certain African American Christian traditions of the Great Migration, like the Spiritual churches and Pentecostalism. Chireau draws striking parallels between conjure and these African American Christian churches, although the differences are significant as well. Pentecostalists, for example, posited a monotheistic worldview at odds with the moral universe of conjure, in which good and evil as absolutes are replaced with security and danger.

In chapter five, Chireau brings the story close to the present, reviewing the cultural adaptations of conjure among urban blacks in Northern cities. She links conjure with the blues and various esoteric African American movements. She also points out the importance of conjure in the evolution of the study of folklore in the twentieth century. Many anthropologists, such as Zora Neale Hurston, laid important foundations for later studies of African American religions. Chireau’s discussion here pays homage to her academic predecessors. Because of their pioneering work, she can write a book like *Black Magic*. They are also an important part of conjure’s story, and thus are subjects for Chireau’s study as well as pathfinders in the field of African American religious studies.

One troubling aspect of conjure that Chireau could have given more attention to was the fact that many African Americans denounced conjure from a Christian viewpoint. This disparity between Christianity and conjure needs to be investigated more closely. Chireau highlights the examples where conjure and Christianity overlap, but dismisses or explains away the very clear instances of Christian African Americans’ opposition to conjure. The differences between conjure and Christianity point to important features and divisions within African American communities, from slave times onward, that deserve the same kind of thorough study that Chireau gives us in this book. Despite this problem, this book is indisputably a compelling, well-written examination of conjure, highly recommended for undergraduate courses on African American history and religions.

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