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Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic

Yvonne Chireau

Shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century, an amateur collector of Negro spirituals and folklore recounted a conversation that she had had with an unidentified African American clergyman. According to the collector, the clergyman, "one of the most scholarly and noted ministers of the colored race," admitted that, even as a professed Christian, he found himself "under the influences of *voodooism*" and other African occult practices. He explained that, as a young pastor, he had grown "completely discouraged" after numerous unsuccessful attempts to attract new worshipers into his congregation until one day an unexpected visitor happened his way:

I was in my study praying when the door opened and a little Conjure man came in and said softly: "You don't understand de people. You must get you a *hand* as a friend to draw 'em. Ef you will let me fix you a luck charm, you'll git 'em."

The minister accepted the "hand" from the Conjuror, which was a small, homemade talisman, and found to his surprise that his church was full the very next week. "For four years," he recalled, "the aisles were crowded every Sunday." Disgusted, the minister eventually destroyed the charm, unable to reconcile his increasing popularity with the apparent potency of the occult object. "I knew it was not the gospel's power, but that wretched 'luck ball.' " Perplexed, he concluded, "I . . . have never been able to draw an audience since."¹

In the history of American religion, this anecdote serves as an intriguing reminder of the diverse currents that have long contended with Christianity for the spiritual allegiance of both clergy and laypersons. The minister's tacit acceptance and eventual rejection of the Conjuror's charm illustrates how even religiously observant individuals can adopt unorthodox, idiosyncratic beliefs and behavior under circumstances where unbridgeable gaps in knowledge or loss of control may exist. As I will argue, this story is not an exceptional

case; rather, it is an example of the kind of convergence of beliefs that commonly occurred between African American magic and Christianity. For generations, magic has persisted in black culture, often obscured but deemed compatible with other spiritual traditions. Its widespread appeal is attested to by numerous accounts describing conjuring relics, supernatural rituals, and occult specialists among African American churchgoers. From slavery days to the present, practitioners and clients of the magical arts have moved freely across ecclesial boundaries, drawing copiously from the symbols and language of Christianity. The picture of black religion that emerges is, thus, more complex than formulations distinguishing between magic and religion as separate empirical categories would indicate.

Conjure is African American occultism. The term applies to an extensive area of magic, practices, and lore that includes healing, spells, and supernatural objects. Conjure belongs to a broader realm of beliefs that have historically occupied the spiritual imagination of both blacks and whites. Recent studies of early American religion have shown that a tangle of esoteric, heterodox, and occult traditions was inherited by European colonists and, after flourishing for several generations, gradually was reconfigured in the wake of eighteenth-century Protestant entrenchment.² Spiritual variety is no less prevalent today, when neopaganism, witchcraft, New Age traditions, and other experimental spiritualities compete with established religions and popular interpretations of magic abound within American subcultures. Black American Conjure is but one facet in a spectrum of supernatural beliefs that continues to thrive, albeit covertly, in the United States.³

The relationship between Conjure and Christianity has been traditionally regarded as inimical, due to the assumed conflict between the immutability of divine will and the claims of individuals to be able to manipulate spiritual power. Scholars of religion have been divided on the meaning of Conjure practices in African American life. Some interpreters have viewed occult beliefs as residual superstitions, the consequence of an incomplete Christianization of black Americans that began in slavery.⁴ Others have portrayed magical practices as enduring survivals of native African traditions: detached from their religious moorings, occult beliefs are seen to have provided the spiritual fodder by which bondspersons challenged slaveowner hegemony and retained a powerful ancestral heritage.⁵ Although each has some legitimacy, none of these viewpoints does complete justice to describing the relationships of accommodation and assimilation that allowed practitioners of Conjure and Christianity to reconcile their beliefs. As religious traditions, both Conjure and

Christianity provided unique resources that addressed diverse cultural needs and interests within African American life.

With the arrival of European occultism and magical beliefs in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America, the parallel transfer of spiritual traditions of an equally significant group of migrants—those of Africans—had also begun. Although the genealogy for the conveyance of Old World occult practices is more explicit for European immigrants than for Africans (a legacy of print culture), the vast funneling of persons from the African continent into the Western hemisphere swiftly countered the white colonial presence. Magic and occultism, embedded in West African religious beliefs, made the long and torturous journey to the New World, where they were assimilated in the spiritual consciousness of black slaves.⁶ In contrast to African American magic, the rise of occultism among white settlers in America resulted from the diffusion of folk supernaturalism, miracle lore, and mystical philosophies, a process that began in Europe and reached far back to medieval times.⁷ For blacks, magic and occult beliefs were profoundly shaped by the religious worlds in which Africans had lived prior to the diaspora.

In the cultures from which the slaves were drawn in West and Central Africa, religion was not a distinct, compartmentalized sphere of activity but a way of life within which all social structures, institutions, and relationships were rooted. The African person was immersed in a spiritual universe; spirituality provided the basis for knowledge. African societies were organized around belief in a wholly sacred reality, which was manifested both by the material realm of the senses, inhabited by human beings, and by the realm of the unseen, inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and the dead. Traditional African religions were oriented toward the invocation of these powerful otherworldly forces for various purposes, including the prediction of the future, the explanation of the unknown, and the control of nature, persons, and events.⁸

African priests and practitioners were specially trained and empowered to access the supernatural by engaging in ritual discourse with divinities and ancestors and by receiving revelations. Described by one Danish observer in the late seventeenth century, the multitude of talents possessed by religious practitioners on Cape Coast (West Africa) included "soothsaying," divination, and diverse forms of clairvoyance:

They practise such sorcery or soothsaying in various ways. One [priest] claims to prophesy by looking continually in a basin full of water and pretending to perceive something most wonderful

in it. Another proposes to tell future things from the fire. . . . The priests who boast of their ability to foretell the future travel all over the country. . . .⁹

Priestly powers also extended to the interpretation of dreams, visions, signs, and astrology. In most African religions, the role of the religious authority was that of an intermediary that linked the spirit world and the community, whose social well-being was dependent on the maintenance of order in the cosmic realm.¹⁰

Created objects were customarily employed as vessels of the supernatural throughout West and Central Africa. These included portable talismans, called "fetishes" or "grigri" by foreign witnesses. In the late 1600's, Jean Barbot, a European merchant, observed the myriad properties of "grigri, or spells and charms" he found to be ubiquitous among Gold Coast blacks. Barbot commented that it was commonly believed by those possessing them that "one grigri will save them from drowning at sea, and another from being killed in war; another again will give a woman a safe childbirth, another will prevent fires, another heal fevers. . . ."¹¹ Nicholas Owen, an Irish sailor in eighteenth-century Shebro, Sierra Leone, described the powers of "gregory bags," which were believed to preserve individuals from "shot, knives, poyson or other axcedents of life." "In thier opinions," he wrote, "it's impossible to hurt a man that has one of these bags about him, which occations them to appear more resolute in the face of thier enemys. . . ."¹² Objects of spiritual efficacy, charms were greatly valued by Africans for the health, protection, and prosperity of the individual and the community.¹³

These two significant features of African religions—the utility of sacred charms and the diversity of skills embodied by religious specialists—were imported to the American colonies during the Atlantic slave trade. In the New World, supernaturalism took multiple configurations among the slaves, ranging from fragmented rituals that recalled traditional African religious observances to composite practices that were grafted onto Christian beliefs. In the British colony of Jamaica, magical practices were systematized in *obeah*, an African-derived religion of curing, resistance, and divination that was widespread among plantation blacks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴ Practitioners of *obeah* were recognized as spiritual authorities in Caribbean slave societies. "The most sensible among them fear the supernatural powers of the African obeah-men, or pretended *conjurers*," wrote British historian Edward Long in 1774. Long noted that black "priests or obeah-men" functioned as powerful "oracles" for Jamaican slaves "in all weighty affairs, whether of peace, war, or the

pursuit of revenge."¹⁵ Beyond *obeah* rituals, occultism was kept alive in New World slave communities in ancestral remembrances, blood oaths, and antiwitchcraft sects like *Myal*, which reconciled missionary Christianity and native African spirituality.¹⁶

For blacks in Britain's mainland colonies in North America, African occult techniques and knowledges merged with the Christian beliefs that some slaves adopted, although the assimilation that occurred was to a lesser degree than that of other New World fusions of magic and religion. In contrast to its public ceremonial manifestations in the Caribbean, black American occultism acquired largely private, noncollective, and noninstitutionalized forms. Nevertheless, African American magic can best be seen as fitting into a continuum of religion and supernatural beliefs that extended from the Old to the New World.¹⁷ Like so many elements of African religion in the Western hemisphere, magic was transformed in the diaspora. In the American South, sources indicate that a kinship emerged between supernaturalism and slave Christianity. As Protestantism became more widely embraced and indigenized among American-born blacks, remaining elements of African magic were incorporated into organized religious life, while others were absorbed into African American folk beliefs.

Forbidden and unable to maintain collective African religious practices, black slaves in America stood between the eroding cosmologies of the old order and the newer conceptions derived from Christianity. Western religious ideas such as the doctrine of original sin, the stark moral dichotomy of good and evil, and the centrality of a text-based religious culture were foreign to those slaves who had not been influenced by Islam or Christianity prior to European contact. Converts bridged the interstices that lay between the two worlds by creating accommodations. To harmonize their views of the African universe with the monotheistic claims of Protestantism, some blacks reinterpreted many of their traditional beliefs. The numerous divinities of African religions, for example, were recast. The lesser gods and deities were apotheosized in the trickster-like figure of Satan; as animated, invisible beings; or were reconceived as nether forces—otherworldly entities, ghostly presences, and disembodied spirits—the stuff of folk tradition. The sacred functions of African religious leaders and priests were also reformulated in the African American context. Black Christian preachers and prophets assumed a variety of public religious roles, while Conjurers fulfilled private spiritual commissions. Most significant, when African beliefs were transformed in the New World, the efficacious orientation of traditional religion was displaced. The immediacy of ritual access to divinities, gods, and

ancestors was undermined by the Christian doctrine of providence, which posited belief in a supreme being as the sole mediating authority between humanity and nature. As divine motives were considered to be unfathomable and beyond human comprehension, unauthorized claims to supernatural empowerment presented a challenge to one of the primary assumptions of the Christian worldview: the singular, uncontested sovereignty of God's power and will. According to official Protestant thought and doctrine, magic and occultism occupied the realm of heresy and heathenism.

African American Conjurers viewed their world through a different lens. For them, magic and religion were symbiotic, two compatible perspectives that relied on each other. For example, the authority of Conjurers and the authority of Christian ministers often overlapped, and many blacks found their functions to be complementary. William Webb was one such individual who embodied both roles. A bondsman in Kentucky, Webb recalled that he had prepared special bags of roots for other slaves to carry in order to keep peace between masters and bondspersons on local plantations. The roots, he explained, were to be used in conjunction with prayer. When asked by other slaves about the function of the bags, he explained, "I told them those roots were able to make them faithful when they were calling on the Supreme Being, and to keep [their] mind at work all the time." Webb, who also believed in the mystical significance of dreams, prophecy, and "sleight of hand," represented a transitional figure who combined the practices of occult specialist and religious functionary.¹⁸

William Webb was not unique. A variety of persons moved between Christianity and the spiritual prospects that magic both promised and fulfilled. In the 1840's, Mary Livermore described a black preacher she had met on a farm in Virginia, "a man of many gifts." According to Livermore, "Uncle" Aaron, this local minister and exhorter, was simultaneously popular as "a conjurer who could raise evil spirits, and a god-man who wore a charm, and could become invisible at any moment."¹⁹ Another slave known only as Elihu was recognized as "an old and creditable member of the church," who was as "punctilious as a Pharisee" in his religious observances, according to one writer. Nonetheless, Elihu also placed great faith in charms, Conjuring, witches, spells, and his own gifts for the "miraculous cures" of animals and humans that he performed in the South Carolina countryside.²⁰

Similar patterns continued long after emancipation. In Missouri, in 1887, folklorist Mary A. Owen wrote of a sexton she had met in an African Methodist church whose authority extended to his role

as a powerful supernatural specialist. He and others in his circle of "Voodoos" saw no contradiction between his two positions.²¹ In rural Mississippi shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century, a white anthropologist came upon several famous local "Voodoo doctors" who were also well-known "Reverends" whose ministries were supported by members of the community: "[T]hose who are devoutly religious are also devout believers in current folk superstitions," she noted, "and do not look upon Christianity and voodoo as conflicting in any way."²² Other early-twentieth-century supernatural practitioners, such as Jimmy Brisbane, were active participants in local religious life. Brisbane, a successful root doctor and Conjuror, hosted weekly prayer meetings and church gatherings where clients of black occultism and African American Christians were brought together in his home on John's Island, South Carolina.²³ Allan Vaughan, a Conjuror "of great repute" from the Jordan clan in North Carolina, "conducted prayer meetings and sat on the mourner's bench" in the Baptist church, according to a local historian.²⁴ And perhaps the most famous Conjuror of all, the Gullah "Doctor" Buzzard, was himself a favored patron of Christian causes. It was said that Buzzard financed and built two of the largest churches on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, in the early twentieth century.²⁵

Conjurors were often devout individuals. William Adams, a former slave from Texas, cultivated a distinguished reputation among his peers for his esoteric interpretations of biblical lore. He was sought after for his healing and magical knowledge. In an interview at the age of ninety-one, Adams attributed his supernatural expertise to the power of God and found justification for his occult beliefs in the doctrines of Christianity:

There am lots of folks, and educated ones too, that says we-uns believes in superstition. Well, 'tis cause they don't understand. 'Member the Lord, in some of His ways, can be mysterious. The Bible says so. There am some things the Lord wants all folks to know, some things just the chosen few to know, and some things no one should know. Now, just 'cause you don't know 'bout some of the Lord's laws, 'tain't superstition if some other person understands and believes in such. . . . When the Lord gives such power to a person, it just comes to 'em.

William Adams believed that "special persons" were chosen to "show de powah" of God, as was written in the Gospel of Mark. Such appeals to esoteric knowledge based upon personal exegesis were not uncommon for practitioners of Conjure.²⁶

Supernatural specialists relied on their experience of the divine for guidance. A student from Virginia's Hampton Institute wrote a letter in 1878 to the school concerning a well-known practitioner who was also a deeply religious woman: "[S]he had a special revelation from God," he remarked, "as do all the Conjure doctors I have ever heard of."²⁷ When asked by a white professor where she had learned her knowledge of divination and "tricking," or casting spells, a Conjure woman in Alabama named Seven Sisters replied, "It's a spirit in me that tells—a spirit from the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . I tricks in the name o' the Lord."²⁸ Newbell Niles Puckett, a white sociologist who infiltrated the ranks of black Hoodoo workers in the rural South during the early twentieth century, commented on the conscientiousness and piety that was demonstrated by almost all of the occult specialists that he came across. Far from projecting an irreverent style of conduct, Puckett noted, many Conjurers believed that their vocations should reflect proper dispositions of religious devotion and service.²⁹

Evidence indicates that the enchanted world of Conjure and the sacred realm of African American Christianity intertwined in black folk thought. Some Conjurers were summoned to their careers in ways that were evocative of the Christian call to ministry. Zora Neale Hurston recounted such an event from the experience of Father Abraham, the "Hoodoo Doctor" of Lawtey, Florida, who "converted" to being a rootworker and healer after a sudden revelation:

One day as he was plowing under the parching sun, he suddenly stopped, his face bathed in perspiration. Calling his wife he said, "Honey, I jes can't do dis yere work; I has a feelin' God's done called his chile for higher t'ings. Ever sence I been a boy I done had dis yere feelin' but I jes didn' obey. 'Quench not the spirit,' saith de Lord." Throwing down his plow Abraham left the field, never to return to it again as a laborer.³⁰

It was not unusual for black Conjure practitioners to profess a commitment to Christianity while acknowledging the powers of the occult world. "Uncle" John Spencer, a devout Baptist and former slave, told Works Progress Administration interviewers in the 1930's that he still believed in "tricking," or malign magic, explaining that Conjure had been used extensively for revenge in the days when he was a slave in Virginia.³¹ A nineteenth-century Georgia freedman, Braziel Robinson, proudly described himself as a "member of the church" with "a seat in Conference." Robinson's claim to occult power was that he had been born with a "caul"—that amniotic veil covering a newborn's face—and could see spirits, one that "prowled

around" and another that inhabited his body. He apparently saw no disparity between his mediumship abilities and his religious beliefs because, as he put it, "My two spirits are good spirits, and have power over evil spirits, and unless my mind is evil, can keep me from harm."³² In the late 1800's, a folklorist interviewed occult specialists who met regularly in a Missouri African Methodist church where some were members. The potential conflict between Conjure and Christianity was pointed out by the writer, who condescendingly described "the old-fashioned negro, who is destined to have no son like him, who conjures in the name of his African devil on Saturday, and goes to a Christian church, sings, prays and exhorts, and after 'meetin' invites the minister to a dinner of stolen poultry on Sunday."³³

Not all churchgoing occult specialists, however, were benign. In post-Civil War Arkansas, a former bondsman practiced Conjure on unsuspecting victims out of "meanness" and belonged at the same time to a local Baptist congregation. It was said that he dabbled in Hoodoo because he knew he had "*surance er salvation anyhow*."³⁴ Another late-nineteenth-century Arkansas Conjuror was "renowned in three counties" for his alleged role in the deaths of at least ten men and women by occult means. "He is a pious man and a deacon in the church," scoffed a reporter, "which used to surprise me until I knew more about the African brand of piety."³⁵ Ministers and preachers utilized the negative side of Conjure and magic. Newbell Puckett uncovered a strand in southern folklore that explained this seeming duplicity: there are "good and bad hoodoos," he found, "the good hoodoo often being part hoodoo and part preacher."³⁶

For many who practiced Conjure, the proximity of the spirit realm dramatized the unpredictable, dangerous presence of forces that could strike at the most faithful of believers. White businessman Thaddeus Norris wrote of a young slave in antebellum New Orleans who, "although a consistent professor of the Christian religion," believed that he had been "bewitched" by "one of his co-worshippers." Terrified, the boy was taken to a city physician and later recovered from his malady after the doctor acknowledged his complaint as being the work of Conjurors.³⁷ So common was the threat of malevolent occultism in religious circles that, when the "most prominent member in the Baptist colored church" in an unidentified northern town fell sick, she was immediately convinced that she was a victim of a "fix" due to the jealousy of one of the choir members.³⁸ Neither were church officials immune to the Conjuror's powers. According to an account by an ex-slave in Lynchburg, a pastor who had graduated from Virginia Seminary believed that he had been somehow poisoned

by a spurned woman. Even after receiving medicine from a Conjure doctor, he took ill and died.³⁹ A similar story from a former bondsman in nineteenth-century Georgia reported that a hardshell Baptist preacher died from Conjure after believing that snakes had invaded his body.⁴⁰ And in an 1874 article, the *New York Times* stated that it had confirmed reports in Clarksville, Tennessee, that a black preacher had been "hoodooed" and, going "hopelessly insane," ultimately had to leave his pulpit.⁴¹

As in Christianity, the spiritual and the physical worlds were traversed by the ritual activity of occult specialists. The will of God was divined and revealed in miracles and signs, while capricious forces were harnessed and controlled. In some instances, supernatural practitioners were able to control the very elements. Practitioners such as Tante Dolores of New Orleans could quiet a storm by splitting it with an axe, while a "seventh son," Overlea of Mississippi, was able to produce rain by crossing two matches with salt.⁴² These customs indicate that the arena that was governed by divine activity in folk religious thought was believed to be inclusive of the natural sphere of earthly forces.⁴³ Similar ideas would not have been alien to many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian ministers who tapped popular supernaturalism by claiming possession of divine gifts and attributes that enabled them to work miracles, signs, and wonders.⁴⁴

Conjurers often appropriated rituals and sacred symbols from Christianity. Many charms were endowed with magical potency "in the name of the Lord."⁴⁵ Religious accoutrements adopted from Christian traditions were enlisted by black specialists for purposes of protection and prediction. For some blacks, the rich iconographic influences of Catholicism informed their selection of occult artifacts. Old Divinity, a Mississippian Conjuror who claimed to be the grandson of a witch, was buried clutching his cherished silver medal of Saint Anthony and the infant Jesus.⁴⁶ In Georgia, W. D. Siegfried, a Baptist missionary who lived among African Americans after the Civil War, complained bitterly of the sale and dissemination of religious books and pictures, which were frequently adopted for use as holy objects and charms, to the freedmen in Augusta. Especially notorious was the "Letter from Jesus Christ," which circulated extensively, according to Siegfried, among black families. "The poor people have been deluded into the belief that the Letter is *genuine*," he railed, "that it was written especially for them, that those possessing it and exhibiting it in their dwellings, will enjoy certain great protection and blessings enumerated in the letter." The letter, which claimed to guarantee

protection from natural disasters, theft, and ensure safe childbirth for women, was apparently the stock of Roman Catholic merchandisers.⁴⁷

Sacred paraphernalia were utilized in other unorthodox ways. A common divination procedure among African American occult practitioners involved the use of the Bible for detection of thieves and criminals. Jacob Stroyer, who had been a bondsman in South Carolina, gave a detailed account of the process employed by slaves to find burglars in the plantation community:

[F]our men were selected, one of which had a bible with a string attached to it, and each man had his own part to perform. . . . These four would commence at the first cabin with every man of the family, and the one who held the string attached to the bible would say John or Tom, whatever the person's name was, you are accused of stealing a chicken or a dress from Sam at such a time, then [one] of the other two would say, "John stole the chicken," and another would say, "John did not steal the chicken." They would continue their assertions . . . then the men would put a stick in the loop of the string that was attached to the bible, and hold it as still as they could, one would say, "Bible, in the name of the Father, and the Son and of the Holy Ghost, if John stole that chicken, turn," that is, if the man had stolen what he was accused of, the bible was to turn around on the string, and that would be a proof that he did steal it.⁴⁸

A former slave from Tennessee, Byrl Anderson, told how his white master would "tell many a fortune . . . by hanging the Bible on a key and saying certain words." Anderson recalled, "When the Bible would come to me, it would just spin. That meant that I was [a] lucky and righteous man."⁴⁹ In another nineteenth-century account, folklorist Sarah Handy described a system of divination known as "turning the sifter" in which a "man of standing in the church" was able to detect an unknown thief or wrongdoer by balancing a sifter between two chairs. She surmised that the ritual was an African survival adapted by black Americans: "Substitute a raw-hide shield on two upright spears, and a Voodoo incantation for the Christianized chant," she proposed, "and you have the rite as it is practiced today on the Guinea Coast."⁵⁰

The lore and images of the Bible provided a fertile field for African American occult specialists. According to writer Zora Neale Hurston, the Bible was considered by many Conjurers to be the "greatest Conjure book in the world," while Moses was "honored as the greatest Conjuror."⁵¹ Other practitioners swore by the Seventh Book of Moses, a formulaic treatise of occult science and philosophy that was considered by some blacks to be the "Hoodoo bible."⁵² Belief

in the powers contained in writing and letters may have increased as literacy acquired a near-sacred significance for many black Americans in the post-emancipation era.⁵³

Conjure specialists and clients alike employed the spiritual idiom of Christianity. Some prayed in order to cast spells while others spoke in tongues when performing rituals.⁵⁴ In 1901, black novelist Charles Chesnutt interviewed an aged woman who told how she was spared from the malicious powers of a Conjuror after she heard a voice from the "Spirit er de Lawd."⁵⁵ In Georgia during the early twentieth century, ex-slave Jack Atkinson asserted that he was protected from Conjurers through the power of Jesus.⁵⁶ A twentieth-century author in Washington, D.C., described a case where a "hoodoo man" approached a woman who had been conjured, saying that, "with the help of the Bible," he would be able to cure her. "He read from the good book and prayed aloud for the salvation of her soul," said the writer, "before he preceded [*sic*] to mutter to himself" mystical incantations that would bring about her healing.⁵⁷ Finally, Patsy Moses, a former slave in Texas, recalled how her grandfather, a "hardshell" Baptist preacher, was sought out by church members who wanted him to "break spells" that had been placed on them by "voodoo or de charms by de conjur doctor." This particular case suggests that Conjure sometimes represented an alternative, competing form of spiritual authority for blacks.⁵⁸

The most common way to remove a "fix," a "hex," a "trick," or bad fortune, was to enlist the services of another Conjuror. For many blacks, illness was viewed as the work of the devil, and Conjure was associated with the universal contest between the forces of good and evil. Some persons who had been afflicted would call upon God to reverse their condition.⁵⁹ While their techniques could vary, it was not unheard of for Conjure specialists to prescribe a cure for illness in combination with prayer. Rossa Cooley, a white educator stationed on the Sea Islands after the Civil War, described how one ex-slave woman she knew was convinced she had been conjured and sought help from the local "colored doctor," who prescribed medicine *and* prayer for relief from the affliction.⁶⁰ Even as the Bible and other texts were sometimes viewed as *written* charms through which power was exercised, prayer was often adopted as a *spoken* charm or incantation. In the Christian tradition of prayer, black folk appealed to God for protection and moral strength. But a larger province of powers was also available through prayer for specific entreaties. The use of biblical sayings and prayers as ingredients in magical spells and charms is an element of the occult tradition that dates as far back as the origins of Christianity itself.⁶¹

The items that Conjurers employed to cure often had enormous sacred significance. Occult specialists made use of natural materials that they believed were endowed with spiritual efficacy, including leaves, bark, and organic essences, many named for sacred figures and objects. Herbs called Angel's Root, Devil's Shoestring, bowels-of-Christ, and blood-of-Jesus leaf were utilized to heal and give the carrier control and protection. Individuals who possessed Samson's Root or Saint-John's-wort (High John the Conqueror) boasted of supernatural abilities and good fortune. The leaves of the Peace Plant and the King of the Woods, patterned in the shape of a cross, were sacred and powerful if used with a prayer to "the Father, Son and Holy Ghost."⁶²

Supernaturalism interpenetrated the belief systems of many African American Christians. The God of Jesus and Moses was also the sovereign lord of the spirit world whose powers were occasionally witnessed in "signs and wonders." To some, it was all a matter of revelation. "The old folks . . . knows more about the signs that the Lord uses to reveal his laws than the folks of today," recalled a ninety-three-year-old former slave. "Some of the folks laughs . . . says it am superstition, but it am knowing how the Lord reveals His laws."⁶³ For others, supernatural power revealed God's omnipotence. As a legacy of traditional African thought, black American religion fused the natural and supernatural arenas. For many slaves and ex-slaves, the spiritual realm remained a densely populated universe, a world where ghosts, witches, and apparitions heralded the presence of restless or malevolent forces. To Christians, biblical characters had a real, earthly presence and intervened directly in human affairs, as did other powerful, unseen spirit beings. Furthermore, in black folk belief, the boundaries between the self and the spirit were often experienced as permeable. Conjure practices, like African American possession ceremonies and healing rituals, placed a great emphasis on the acquisition of supernatural power for addressing mundane needs.⁶⁴

This lack of a stark dichotomy between the sacred and the secular led many blacks to view the supernatural as impinging directly upon present-day human experience. It is perhaps within such a context that the distinctive emphasis on divine intervention in African American religious life both before and after emancipation can be understood. The folk religion of African American slaves put a premium on the spirit as an immediate and effective force. Gaining access to this supernatural power was an enduring concern that linked Christianity and Conjure. The practice of prayer, meditation, the black tradition of "shouting," and the emotional relinquishing of self as experienced in conversion were all aspects of African American

religious life, whose goal was to bring the individual into a supernatural or transcendent experience. The occult practice of manipulating forces through various physical means attempted similar goals. It was this *theurgic* function, the intervention of the supernatural, that produced much of the variety—and some of the moral tension—that existed in the folk religions of the slaves and their descendants. Yet, for occult practitioners and their clients, Conjure was a legitimate appropriation of spiritual energies and forces.

Of course, many blacks remained skeptical or disbelieving of Conjure and occultism, as some did of Christianity. Some rejected magic yet equivocated when reflecting on other aspects of supernatural belief. “I never know much about de hoodoo, but de spirits, yes,” explained one former slave. “God is a spirit, ain’t he?” George Wood, who had been a bondsman in South Carolina, insisted that he had never seen ghosts and had never heard of anyone being conjured. “I don’t believe in those things anyhow,” he remarked, but he discreetly revealed his wariness of the reputation that South Carolina blacks had for practicing folk magic. Katie McCart, a former slave from Old Fort, Georgia, rejected any notion of the efficacy of Conjure charms. “Now me, I don’t believe people can put something under steps or under your house that will harm you.” She did, however, place much stock in signs and omens, especially portentous dreams and good luck practices, traditions with which she was “plenty ‘sperienced.”⁶⁵

The coexistence of African American Christianity and occultism in black culture can be seen as reflecting a complex ambivalence. Certainly, the nature of the supernatural power that was implied in Conjure practices tended to foster reservations on the part of many blacks, for occultism was utilized alternatively to cure or to inflict harm upon others. In many cases, malign Conjure was manifested by physical maladies and inexplicable adversities such as natural disasters or sudden death. As such, Conjure served as a powerful theory for explaining unanticipated instances of misfortune. More precisely than Christianity, Conjure articulated an epistemology by which African Americans could understand and address their afflictions. In its elaborate rituals, its therapeutic orientation, and its multiple expressions, Conjure advanced the prospect of directly resolving one’s own suffering.

Conjure and Christianity were complementary in that they each responded to a distinctive set of cultural concerns surrounding issues of explanation and control. Both, for example, offered a means for comprehending evil and misfortune in human existence. Yet, in the Conjuring tradition, the occurrence of illness, bad luck, and even

death was likely to be viewed in personal terms: the source of one's distress could be a malevolent spell, a hidden charm, or a "fix" perpetrated by a vengeful person. Within black folk Christianity, these afflictions were interpreted as the consequence of human sinfulness, the work of Satan, or as part of a greater plan within God's will. In both traditions, evil was identified and located within one or more explanatory frameworks, but, for addressing specific conditions of misfortune within African American culture, Conjure and Christianity each offered contrasting therapeutic possibilities.

In the era of slavery, questions of security loomed large in African American experience. The social dictates of the slave institution created environments that were rife with uncertainty for black bondspersons, who consistently endured threats of violence, sickness, separation, destitution, and the ever-present realities of racism within their lives. The day-to-day conditions of enslavement engendered a variety of cultural responses from members of African American communities. For its part, Conjure spoke directly to the slaves' perceptions of powerlessness and danger by providing alternative—but largely symbolic—means for addressing suffering. The Conjuring tradition allowed practitioners to defend themselves from harm, to cure their ailments, and to achieve some conceptual measure of control over personal adversity. Christianity also addressed suffering but did so primarily as a universal system of moral, soteriological, and ethical beliefs. As Albert Raboteau has noted, as a religion, Christianity was "well suited for describing the ultimate cause of things and the ultimate end of history" because, in many ways, it prioritized issues of "personal morality and personal salvation" above questions of personal security.⁶⁶ Conjure, however, was utilized for everyday needs that ranged from protection from physical violation to treatment of critical health matters. Religiously pragmatic, African Americans were inclined to invoke Conjure, Christianity, or both for addressing any number of concerns they might face in their immediate circumstances. It was possible for African Americans to shift between Conjure and Christianity because both were anchored in their perceptions of an enchanted universe, and both met needs that the other could not.

Occult beliefs retained their power within black folk culture long after slavery ended. More recently, the efficacious impulses of Spiritualist traditions, sectarian Christian healing, and New World African religions have channeled supernaturalism into institutional formations that address misfortune in similar ways, thus supplanting the unique functions of Conjure. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century, Conjure emerged as a viable religious alternative to which

many blacks turned in order to give meaning to their suffering. Historically, religion has provided African Americans with sources of hope, with moral foundations, and with prophetic visions of deliverance from present-day trials. Christianity helped to explain and make sense of the unknown, to order the believer's conceptual universe. African American magic functioned in similar ways, but as I have shown, Conjure granted its practitioners an added measure of control. At the heart of black spirituality is an inner quest for fulfillment, an abiding search for security. In African American culture, the worlds of Conjure and Christianity converged, creating empowering responses to misfortune and other persistent needs in human experience.

Notes

1. Jeanette Robinson Murphy, "The Survival of African Music in America," *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly* 55 (May-October 1899): 663. The *hand*, in African American magic traditions, is believed to be spiritually efficacious and powerful for its owner. Such objects were featured elements in the magical repertoire of black occult specialists. For descriptions and ingredients of African American *hands* and other charms, see James Haskins, *Voodoo and Hoodoo: Their Tradition and Craft as Revealed by Actual Practitioners* (New York: Stein and Day, 1978), 155-70; and Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 231-41.

2. See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 67-97; John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3. Earlier studies of black Conjure traditions in the United States include Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*; Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork: Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and White Persons, These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Hyatt Foundation, 1970-74); Haskins, *Voodoo and Hoodoo*; and, more recently, Theophus Smith, who finds at the heart of African American spirituality a "conjuration" perspective, as exhibited in black biblical traditions. Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

4. See, for example, Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 520-21; see also Henry Mitchell, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 26-27.

5. See Margaret Creel, "A Peculiar People": *Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988),

esp. chap. 9. See also Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

6. My usage of "magic" as a category distinct from other "religious" means of mediating the supernatural may be misleading. Although the terms are exogenous, Africans themselves have distinguished between magical and religious acts based upon the intentions of the practitioners *rather than the focus* of specific practices. In a frequently cited statement on Zairian religious movements, anthropologists de Craemer, Vansina, and Fox argue that the difference between magical and religious acts in African cultures lies in the formulation of their goals: magic is selfish, deriving from personal motives, and is socially disapproved. Religion is group-oriented, collective, and holds positive implications for the larger community. Of course, they note that in life the categories overlap, such as with the use of charms that may affect the individual but may benefit the entire community. See Willy de Craemer, Jan Vansina, and Renee Fox, "Religious Movements in Central Africa: A Theoretical Study," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18, no. 4 (October 1976): 458-75.

7. On the diffusion of magic in America, see Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 67-97; on magic in premodern Europe, see Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971); and Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8. See Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa* 41, no. 2 (1971): 96-97. See also Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*, 2d ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1961), 11-24; and Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

9. "Wilhelm Johann Müller's Description of the Fetu Country, 1662-9," in *German Sources for West African History, 1599-1669*, ed. and trans. Adam Jones (Wiesbaden, Germany: F. Steiner, 1983), 171-72.

10. See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 238-46.

11. Jean Barbot, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712*, ed. P. E. H. Hair (London: Hakluyt Society, 1992), 86, 228.

12. Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a Slave-Dealer: A View of Some Remarkable Accidents in the Life of Nicks. Owen on the Coast of Africa and America from the Year 1746 to the Year 1757*, ed. Eveline Martin (London: Routledge, 1930), 50.

13. See de Craemer, Vansina, and Fox, "Religious Movements in Central Africa," 460; and Wyatt MacGaffey, "Fetishism Revisited: Kongo *nkisi* in Sociological Perspective," *Africa* 47, no. 2 (1977): 179-200.

14. See Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 175-79; see also Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969).

15. Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica: or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of That Island*, 3 vols. (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1774; repr., 1970), 2:416, 473.

16. See Mullin, *Africa in America*, esp. chaps. 3 and 8; on Myalism, see Philip D. Curtin, *Two Jamaicas: The Role of Ideas in a Tropical Colony, 1830-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955); Monica Schuler, "Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica," in *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link*, ed. Margaret E. Crahan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); and Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaica Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

17. On the transfer and interaction of Old World supernaturalism and occult worldviews for Africans and Europeans, see Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 79-89.

18. William Webb, *The History of William Webb* (Detroit: E. Hoekstra, 1873), 22.

19. Mary Livermore, *The Story of My Life; or, The Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Years* (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington, 1899), 254.

20. Charles Raymond, "The Religious Life of the Negro Slave," *Harper's New Monthly Review* 27 (June-November 1863): 820-23.

21. Mary Alicia Owen, "Among the Voodoos," *Proceedings of the International Folklore Congress* 2 (1898): 243.

22. Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (New York: Viking, 1939), 286.

23. See Mamie Garvin Fields, with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 121.

24. Roy Johnson, *The Fabled Doctor Jim Jordan: A Story of Conjure* (Murphreesboro, N.C.: Johnson, 1963), 22.

25. See J. E. McTeer, *High Sheriff of the Low Country* (Beaufort, S.C.: Beaufort Book Co., 1970), 22.

26. Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 36; see also George Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, supplement, series 2, vol. 2, *Texas Narratives*, pt. 1 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), 16-17.
27. Leonora Herron, "Conjuring and Conjure Doctors," *Southern Workman* 24, no. 7 (July 1895): 117.
28. Carl Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (New York: Literary Guild, 1934), 218.
29. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 565.
30. Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, Calif.: Turtle Island Press, 1981), 16. For a similar version of a Conjuror's "call," see Johnson, *The Fabled Doctor Jim Jordan*, 56.
31. See Charles Perdue, Thomas Barden, and Robert Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 278.
32. Roland Steiner, "Braziel Robinson Possessed of Two Spirits," *Journal of American Folklore* 13 (1900), repr. in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (New York: Garland Publishing, 1973), 378; see also Virginia Pounds Brown, *Toting the Lead Row* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 127.
33. Owen, "Among the Voodoos," 239.
34. *Boston Herald*, "Life in Arkansas," May 29, 1897, 20.
35. Octave Thanet, "Folklore in Arkansas," *Journal of American Folklore* 5 (January-March 1892): 122.
36. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 205.
37. Thaddeus Norris, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Magazine* 6 (July 1870), repr. in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 139.
38. Murphy, "The Survival of African Music," 334.
39. Oral narrative, Rev. P. L. Harvey, Lynchburg, Virginia, University of Virginia Special Collections, n.d., folder 2, heading 279, 1-4.
40. Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 13, *Georgia Narratives*, pt. 4, 248.
41. *New York Times*, December 20, 1874.
42. Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 81; Ruth Bass, "Mojo," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Dundes, 382.

43. Supernatural beliefs were not unfamiliar to participants in the Christian tradition. For example, a kind of manipulation of natural forces was also sanctioned in some cases within nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicalism. Two black female preachers, Rebecca Jackson and Amanda Smith, recorded as evidence of their "gifts of power" their abilities to control the weather and curtail threatening human behavior. See Jean Humez, "'My Spirit Eye': Some Functions of Spiritual and Visionary Experience in the Lives of Five Black Women Preachers, 1810-1880," in *Women and the Structure of Society: Selected Research from the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, ed. Barbara J. Harris (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984), 136, 277; Jean Humez, ed., *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 22-23; and Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (Chicago: Meyer, 1893; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 158.

44. See Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 236-41; and Donald E. Byrne, *No Foot of Land: Folklore of American Methodist Itinerants* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 155-70.

45. Owen, "Among the Voodoos," 232.

46. See Ruth Bass, "The Little Man," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Dundes, 394.

47. W. D. Siegfried, *A Winter in the South and Work among the Freedmen* (Newark, N.J.: Jennings Bros., 1870), 17. For the fusion of African American folk beliefs and Catholicism in an early-twentieth-century black community along the Mississippi River, see Ruth Bass, "Ole Miss'," *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany* 3 (1931): 48-69.

48. Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South*, 3d ed. (Salem, Mass.: Salem Observer Book and Job Printing, 1885), 57-58.

49. Perdue, Barden, and Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat*, 11.

50. Sarah Handy, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 48 (1891): 738.

51. Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 45 (October-December 1931): 414.

52. Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, 2:1758; see also Hans Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 130.

53. Three twentieth-century sources mentioning "letters" or "books" point to the possibility that there was a magical significance attached to such articles. The concept of the mystical power of the word that is written, so prominent in Islamic lore, was possibly fused with the African notion of spirit-embedding charms, which were adopted by black Americans as objects

of power. For examples, see Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 17-18; Norman Whitten, "Contemporary Patterns of Malign Occultism among Negroes in North Carolina," *Journal of American Folklore* 75 (October-December 1962): 315; and Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 294-95.

54. See Mrs. A. Right, informant, Atlanta, Georgia, Newbell Puckett Papers, box 8, file no. 2, Cleveland Public Library.

55. Charles Chesnutt, "Superstition and Folklore of the South," *Modern Culture* 13 (1901), repr. in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Dundes, 374.

56. Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 4, *Georgia Narratives*, 17.

57. M. S. Lea, "Two-Head Doctors," *American Mercury* (October 1929): 237.

58. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, 34; see also Rawick, *The American Slave*, supplement, series 2, vol. 7, *Texas Narratives*, pt. 6, 2782.

59. See, for example, the comments of Ellen Dorsey regarding the devil and Conjure in the Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 27; and Handy, "Negro Superstitions," 736.

60. Rossa Belle Cooley, *The Homes of the Freed* (New York: New Republic, 1926), 41.

61. See Benjamin A. Botkin, *A Treasury of Southern Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions, and Folkways of the People of the South* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 639.

62. Ruth Bass, "Fern Seed—For Peace," in *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany* 2 (1930): 56; see also Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 557-59. For the use of plants in folk healing in contemporary black Christian traditions, see Karen Baldwin, "Mrs. Emma Dupree: That Little Medicine Thing," *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1984): 50-53.

63. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, 37; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 57.

64. See Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 520-70; Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 1-2; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 99-135; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 250; and Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 37.

65. Ronnie Clayton, *Motherwit: Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project* (New York: P. Lang, 1990), 180; Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 3, *South Carolina Narratives*, pt. 4, 252; Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 25. See also Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 56;

66. Albert Raboteau, "The Afro-American Traditions," in *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions*, ed. Ronald Numbers (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 551.