

Magic and the Supernatural in the African American Slave Culture and Society

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Although historians have previously explored the role of magic in the African American culture, the more specific question of how slaves defined supernatural agency from their own perspective has yet to be investigated. The purpose of my research is to examine slave folklore and personal testimonies about the paranormal to ascertain the beliefs and practices of supernaturalism among enslaved people in the antebellum American South. Analyzing how these sources portray instances of bewitchment, Voodooism, and spiritual possession, I assess their impact on the slave experiences. Furthermore, I investigate the inconsistency between evil spirits' inhabitation of slave individuals, cited in oral histories, with the protective and healing conjuration activities attributed to slaves in the secondary sources. While folk tales cite victimization by Voodoo or bewitchment as punitive measures and former slave interviews depict fear affiliated with presumed witches and spirits, supernatural practitioners were highly regarded within their communities. Thus, in evaluating how slaves understood the supernatural, I seek to reconcile its negative connotation within a culture that simultaneously embraced magical practices.

Much has been written about the African American religious experience that highlights the importance of magic in slave culture. These sources demonstrate that practices associated with spirit worship were incorporated into the slaves' daily routines, such as healing rituals, conjuration practices, and religious veneration. However, the question of how slaves actually

perceived supernaturalism is rarely addressed. Historians have been more inclined to examine the creation of a distinct slave religion, structured in part by their lost heritage, and in part by their new world experiences. To that end, researchers have interpreted slave narratives and music, missionary records, and folk tales to understand slave theology and its function in the community. Despite the number of books published in this area, no single work provides a definitive view of slave religion, probably because the topic is too broad and complex to address in a single book. Historians who have attempted this feat have actually narrowed their scope, resulting in an emphasis on one feature of slave culture while perhaps overlooking others. Thus, my own work focuses on religion in relation to spirits in the slave society of the Southern American states, in order to deduce what the slaves believed about the supernatural world.

The first scholar to investigate the origins of magic in the African American slave culture was Albert Raboteau who documented his findings in *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*. He argues that the African styles of worship, ritual forms, and beliefs have survived in North America because of the “openness of the religions to syncretism with other traditions.”¹ He explained how certain aspects of African culture, such as spiritual possession and other magical folk beliefs that can be interpreted as supernatural, were carried to North America through the Atlantic slave trade. He then traced how these original African notions of spirituality were incorporated into slave society and maintained, despite conversion to Christianity. Raboteau was the first to analyze folklore, slave narratives, and missionary records in an effort to understand the breadth of slave religion and how “the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity.”² By examining these sources, he successfully articulates the

¹ Raboteau, Albert. *Slave Religion the Invisible Institution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 23.

² Raboteau, 25.

relationship between the natural and supernatural in slave religion. This focus on the intersection of the slave's culture African heritage with their new faith, however, led him to overlook practices that contradicted Christianity. Raboteau neglected to discuss how conjuration and Voodoo beliefs about wandering souls and guardian spirits directly opposed the monotheism espoused by the church. By demonstrating how newfound Christianity and African traditions merged harmoniously into a creative and unique slave religion, Raboteau ignored contradictory spiritual beliefs, and thus provided a limited analysis of magic in slave society.

Yvonne Chireau, on the contrary, directly addresses Raboteau's omission in *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, in which she seeks to reconcile the conflicts between slave magic and slave religion. Unlike Raboteau, she examines both the dissonance and convergence between the two tenets and argues that these practices have been experienced as a single unit within the African American cultural experience. Resisting the tendency to polarize religion and magic, Chireau concluded that magic coexisted with Christianity as an alternative means to communicate with the spirits. She suggests that these seemingly divergent traditions have worked together in a complicated, complementary fashion to provide spiritual empowerment for slaves. In investigating a cultural aspect that is often overlooked by both scholars and the general public, Chireau relied on personal anecdotes about Voodoo and root working, folk stories, Works Progress Administration interviews, and post-Reconstruction newspapers to show how magic became embedded in the African American culture. Although she makes an effective argument that magic is an integral part of slave religion, she does not explain how slaves understood the supernatural. In arguing that religion and magic are linked, Chireau does not distinguish religious practices influenced by Christianity from the existing repertoire of "supernatural" healing and punishment rituals. This ambiguity, in

addition to her interchangeable use of the words “magic”, “conjure”, and “supernatural”, leaves the reader unclear about what black magic really is.

Like Chireau, Sharla Fett describes the origins of a slave practice without providing an explanation for what magic meant to those who practiced it. In *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power in Southern Slave Plantations*, Fett offers a more detailed description of African American healing practices, such as herbalism, conjuring, and midwifery, and describes how they became arts of resistance in the antebellum South. She shows how enslaved men and women drew on African precedents to develop a view of health and healing that was distinctly at odds with slaveholders' property concerns. While white slave-owners narrowly defined slave health in terms of "soundness" for labor, slaves believed health was intimately tied to religion and community. African American healing practices functioned both to nurse the body and as a tactic of rebellion against whites. Fett found that the revered role of female root workers in plantation health cultures gave them authority and status within enslaved communities. As a result, power struggles arose between slave “doctoring” women and the white plantation owners. By examining the dynamics of plantation healing, Fett sheds new light on the hierarchy of power in antebellum American slavery. Although she provides a comprehensive view of healing in a slave community, Fett focuses on the correlation between healing abilities and power rather than the spiritual meanings behind them. Her book is useful for investigating what healing rituals existed, but does not explain why they were employed.

Newbell Niles Puckett, on the other hand, explores this spiritual motivation, in *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. Puckett analyzes slave folk tales that give insight into the social and cultural milieu from which black spiritual traditions were derived. He refers to these stories

as “antiques and mental heirlooms”³ that function both to record the daily lives of slaves and provide an escape where they could remember their roots. His book states that the slave society’s harming and curative techniques are derived from widely circulated folk tales. Puckett suggests that the superstitions and themes discussed in these tales are manifested in actual practices. He uses stories, such as one about a boy who develops a relationship with a snake during a drought and another about the hooting of owls when the devil comes out, to explain the origin of actual practices, like the hanging of a snake to make it rain and the symbolism of an owl as an omen. Puckett does an excellent job of demonstrating how the cultural attitudes reflected in folk tales were integrated into the slave community lifestyle.

Joseph Williams also draws primarily on folk tales in his research for his New York Times article, “*Black Magic Among Dark People*” in which he analyzes the prevalence of Voodoo and Obeah within the “black” community. He traces the origins of these practices to early 17th century serpent worship in Haiti and attributes their presence in North America to rebellion attempts. He cites the New York Conspiracy of 1712 as an example of slaves implementing Voodoo tactics to incite a rebellion. Williams also describes the ideology of Obeah, which he believes has transformed into a cult of devil worship that still invokes fear among African Americans; this is evident in their use of the Obeah man as an effigy for evil. Because, like Puckett, Williams’ does not include as a source any slave interviews or historical documents, even when he discusses the various uprisings, his information is speculative, relying more on rumors and gossip than on concrete evidence. This article is nonetheless helpful in its depiction of the use of supernatural agency among slaves.

³ Puckett, Newbell Niles. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. New York: Kessinger Publishing 2003, 26.

In response to the criticism that folk tales may not be a viable enough source for historical analysis, William Coleman, in *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of "Telling the Story"* argues that these oral stories are the best means of understanding the slave experience. Coleman studied slave folklore in order to understand the slave culture with a specific focus on activities and beliefs that impacted contemporary black theology. Coleman discusses the idea of spirit possession portrayed in the stories and compares it to the conversion experience and "holy ghost power" emphasized in modern Black religion. Although Coleman's use of oral histories authoritatively depicts slave life, he takes considerable liberty when drawing parallels between them and contemporary Black theology. Like Raboteau, Coleman's commitment to his argument too often pushed him to stretch rationales into correlations; his assessment is still useful for demonstrating how to analyze folklore.

These secondary sources have shown that slave magic was significant in slave society. From Raboteau one sees the emergence of a unique slave religion from African traditions. Chireau expands on Raboteau's findings to discuss the specific practices of conjuration and Voodoo in relation to Christianity. Fett offers another side of slave magic—the curative efforts of enslaved people and an explanation of their applications. Puckett, Williams, and Coleman all discuss the value of folklore and reveal how it was adopted as fact into a slave's daily life. These sources all offer insight into the existence of magic in the African American slave experience; however they do not illuminate the perception of the supernatural world on the slaves' part. My own analysis of slave interviews, folklore, music, slave owners journals, and missionary records illustrates how slaves have both understood and practiced magic within their communities.

The most prevalent theme associated with slave culture's understanding of the supernatural was the belief in the existence of flying spirits who interfered in the lives of humans. Slave society focused on a *High God*, who was deemed the supreme creator of the world and all forms found in it. Often associated with the sky, this god was believed to be too important to meddle in the affairs of man. Instead, bonds-people held that spirits, due to their capability of flight, monitored the matters of the world and thus directly impacted everyday lives.⁴ This understanding of one true god and his lesser spirits was derived from the West African religious belief in an omnipresent being that transcended ritual relationships with humans. William Bosman, a Dutch slave trader who documented his experiences with the Atlantic Slave Trade, described the beliefs of the Africans he encountered, "It is certain that they believe a god created the universe, and therefore vastly prefer him before their idol gods. But yet they do not pray to him, or offer any sacrifices...god they say is too high exalted above us, and too great to think of Mankind; wherefore he commits the government of their world to their spirits."⁵ It was these entities to which slaves attributed the power to interfere in the daily activities of man and the power to govern the forces of both good and evil. According to slave testimonies these spirits could be as benevolent or malevolent as humans as well as willful or arbitrary.⁶ Therefore, enslaved people believed it imperative to maintain good relations through dutiful praise, sacrifice and obedience. Nearly every interview conducted by the Federal Writers Project with former slaves in 1936 included some reference to a flying spirit. Interviewee Cecilia Small recounted, "Long has I kin membuh, missus, I been heahin bout spirits dat fly. Down on Blackbeard llun, deah wuz a bih hawg wit wuz an ebil spirit. Dey say dat dis spirit was liv'en

⁴ Rabateau, 67.

⁵ Ibid, 43.

⁶ Federal Writer's Project. Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves. Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1942, 155.

dere cuz Bob Delegal gone neglect'en dem. Sometimes doze spirits put spells on yuh, fix yuh.”⁷

The Antebellum slave folktales also emphasize belief in the power of flying spirits to impact day to day experiences. The tales added the notion that spirits were capable of animating objects in nature to affect the welfare of the people. One instance is the story of Sister Becky's Baby, wherein a young woman is sold away from her baby, but through the assistance of a rabbit inhabited by a spirit she is reunited with her child.⁸ Although this folk tale aims to provide hope and inspiration to people despite the restraints of slavery, it also demonstrates the manner in which a belief in spirits permeated slave's daily lives.

The most predominant form of flying spirits found in slave's perception of the supernatural was a witch. Witches were believed to cause illness or death simply by eating an individual's soul. Many stories featured the spirit of the witch taking on an animal form in order to fly to gatherings where the spirits of other witches congregated to consume a soul. Former slave Serina Wyle recalled, “witches kin tun demsefs intuh any shape, an insect, a cat, aw a dog, aw any kine uh animal. Dey kin go tru any kin uh hole and den tuh git yuh.”⁹ If the animal was killed when possessed by a witch's spirit, the sleeping body of the witch was to die at the same instant. They also believed that the spirit of a witch was capable of leaving her body nocturnally for the purpose of riding her victim. “Now das sumpum reel” recounts ex-slave Robert Phillips, “I bin rid lotsuh time by witches. Jist sit on yuh ches and ride yuh. Yuh wake up an feel lak yuk smudduhin. Ef you kin git duh succulation an tro um off, it all right. Uf not yuh dead ur

⁷ Granger, Mary. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Strategies from the Georgia Coast Negroes*. New York: Forgotten Books, 2007, 45.

⁸ Coleman, Will. *Tribal Talk: Black Theology and African American Ways of “Telling the Story”*. College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, 78.

⁹ Federal Writer's Project, 79.

powsessed.”¹⁰ According to slave testimonies and folktales, witches were predominantly female; however they afflicted both genders for a variety of reasons including lust, revenge, and jealousy. Possession by witches was widely used to explain and justify a sudden change in behavior. Many stories featured a wife or husband blaming their spouse’s adulterous conduct and shifting moods on bewitchment. Slaves thought that you could save someone from a witch’s spell by sprinkling salt and pepper on the presumed skin of the invisible witch’s form; this act would prevent the witch’s re-entry into her body. This belief came from the widely circulated folktale called Wee Winnie Witchy. In this tale Mamma Granny filled Wee Winnie Witch’s skin, which was removed prior to riding her victims, with hot pepper. When Wee Winnie returned to re-enter her body, she was “burnt to a crisp”.¹¹ Tactics such as Mamma Granny’s may have helped create the profession of witch hunting, which is discussed often in recounts of the slave experience. What is distinct about the slave perspective of a witch is that she was always looked at in terms of being a “riding” spirit and never in human form. Her “skin” was alluded to, but no story or narrative referred to the witch as a person. She was described as inflicting harm through her soul – not a heart. This differed from the European and American image of a witch, who in that likeness was seen as a person in the same league as the devil. Her association with Satan was absent from the slaves’ impression of a witch, probably because the devil is a largely Christian concept. Thus, slaves’ opinion of the witch as a spirit who sheds her skin and rides her victims nocturnally is unique.

Like witches, ghosts were another form of flying spirits that held a significant position in impacting the daily activities of Southern plantation life. In his journal, runaway slave William

¹⁰ Granger, 35.

¹¹ Coleman, 73.

Grimes describes ghosts “as common as pig tracks”.¹² However, ghosts, unlike witches, were not a source of fear. Often called “duppies”, ghosts were rarely considered evil or dangerous, but were seen more as cunning and sly tricksters and portrayed as schemers who played tricks on unsuspecting humans. They were understood as spirits of the deceased who returned to “haunt” the living as an imposing nuisance. The stories in *Mules and Men*, Zora Neal Hurston’s compilation of African American folktales, feature ghosts repeatedly causing mischief, ranging from stealing another slave’s umbrella to merely irritating a slave to hiding all the plantation tools, thus stalling production.¹³ Despite the fact that ghosts were mostly depicted lightheartedly, there are several references to ghosts as evildoers. Some stories discuss the ghosts of cruel masters, who returned from the grave to continue the torment of their slaves. In his autobiography former slave Lewis Clarke recalls “I was actually as much afraid of my master when dead, as I was when he was alive.”¹⁴ Others suggested that ghosts of the dead had the ability to inflict harm, specifically by seeking revenge against those who harmed them while alive. The folk story “Murders’ Swamp” is about a river basin where someone was viciously murdered; it “is visited at night by beings of unearthly make, whose groans, and death-struggles were heard in the darkest recesses of the woods. Anyone who went there never came back.”¹⁵ Likewise, stories, concerning the ghosts of dead slaves returning to demand justice from their white oppressors were very popular amongst slaves. Furthermore, many slave testimonies, such as Clarke’s, cite numerous rituals used for protection from ghosts, which shows a belief that some ghosts are malicious. Tactics that were often used included burying a corpse face down to

¹² Grimes, Williams. *The Life of William Grimes Runaway Slave*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 139.

¹³ Hurston, Zora Neal. *Mules and Men*. New York: Harper and Row, 1935, 45-56.

¹⁴ Clarke, Lewis. *Narrative of the Suffering of Lewis Garrad Clarke*. Boston: Book Surge Publishing, 1845, 98.

¹⁵ Puckett, Newbell Niles. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2003, 86.

prevent its return from the grave, placing a broom at the front door to keep ghosts from entering, and scattering mustard seeds on the floor of a room to confine the ghosts.¹⁶ These references to “ghost proofing” demonstrate the spiritual aura that slaves believed ghosts possessed.

In addition to ghosts and witches, ancestors were a powerful class of spirits included in slaves’ paranormal beliefs. Within the diverse forms of slave culture documentation, references abound to revered ancestors—those who died long ago and those of more recent memory. It is believed that, as custodians of custom and law, the ancestors have the power to intervene in present affairs by granting fertility and good health to their descendants. It was thought that if a person neglected the veneration of their ancestors, they would be at risk for sickness, misfortune, and even death. Thus, ancestors served as watchful guardians of the customs of the people and would invoke punishments if anyone, particularly their kinsmen, deviated.¹⁷ As a result of these strong convictions, a large part of slave culture was centered on the spirits of the ancestors. In her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes the prevalence of ancestral spirits in a slave’s daily life. She writes, “The living never forget that they are the trustees of the dead...for the dead are always watching to see that the living preserve what their forefathers established. And since the dead have power to bestow either blessing or adversity...the welfare of the living is felt to be bound up with the faithful performance of ancient custom.”¹⁸ Proper adulation of one’s ancestors has also a prominent theme espoused by slave folklore. Many of the tales, such as the well-known Ber Rabbit tales, depicted an inferior

¹⁶ Fett, Sharla. *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 49.

¹⁷ Raboteau, 273.

¹⁸ Jacobsin, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Chicago: Prestwick House, 2006, 54.

animal gaining strength or wisdom through communicating with his ancestral kin.¹⁹

Furthermore, this obligatory worship between man and his ancestors is evident in the emphasis slave society placed on burial rituals. Improper or incomplete funeral rites can interfere with or delay the entrance of the deceased into the spiritual world and may cause his or her soul to linger about, restless and malevolent. Before a funeral was complete, several customs must be observed including proper preparation of the body, ritual mourning after burial, and strict rules pertaining to varying levels of mourning. It was expected that the graves of the deceased were to be lavishly decorated with personal effects.²⁰ Thus, slave society's emphasis on burial rites along with its oratory lessons supports the prominence of ancestral apparitions in slaves' understanding of supernatural agency.

Although witches, ancestors, and ghosts are vital to understanding slave's perception of the world of spirits, it is their participation in the art of conjure that most links their beliefs about supernaturalism to their everyday lives. Conjunction was a magical tradition in which spiritual power was invoked for various purposes such as healing, protection, desire, and self-preservation. It has the means by which the slaves communicate with and manipulate these spirits they so ardently believe. While conjure possessed multiple functions, its most salient had to do with practices of racial opposition. The significance of conjunction as a deterrent against slave owner oppression is ubiquitous in slave narratives, personal testimonies, interviews, and especially folklore. Abolitionist and writer Henry Clay Bruce, who had been enslaved in Virginia, described in his journal a community of slaves that hired the services of a conjurer to

¹⁹ Coleman, 112.

²⁰ Rabateau, 218.

prevent their deportation and removal to a plantation in the Deep South.²¹ The conjurer's powers, they believed, obstructed the slave owner's attempts to separate them, for at the last minute the scheduled relocation was aborted. Such defenses against psychological and physical assaults of slavery were essential for many African Americans. Stories of conjurers who subdued whites were also prominent in the narratives of slaves and former slaves. Clara Walker, an ex-bondswoman from Georgia, told of a black "witchdoctor" who punished a slave holder by creating a mud doll and sticking a needle in its back. "Sure 'nuff, his master gone down with a misery to his back...an de witch doctor let de thorn stay until he though his master got 'nuff punishment."²² Conjuraton thus was the manifestation of bonds-peoples' supernatural beliefs enacted in their everyday lives. It was the device by which slaves could utilize their understanding of spirits who interfere in their lives to their own benefit. Black Americans utilized conjuration not only because they saw it as a valuable resource for retaliation, but also because they believed that the supernatural realm was a source of empowerment.

The story of Old Bab Russ is a perfect example of the way in which slaves have used conjuring to attain a degree of control. The story featured a slave named Bab Russ who used conjure to "make any girl love him in spite of herself no matter who she might be engaged to or walkin with."²³ Additionally, a special status was ascribed to these supernatural practitioners who were capable of conjuration. They possessed the most influential and well-respected roles within the plantation communities. A 19th century journalist in North Carolina who was writing

²¹ Chireau, Yvonne. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 109.

²² Chireau, 78.

²³ Coleman, 96.

an expose on plantation life described a bondswoman as a goddess who slaves believed to “ be in communication with occult powers ...for her utterances were accepted as oracles and piously heeded.”²⁴ Conjuraton can thus be understood as invoking the spiritual powers to revise conditions of human existence.

Dominant in the depictions of slave’s use of conjuration and Voodoo is the link between conflict and supernaturally induced misfortune. Most accounts of these spiritual powers of affliction were precipitated by a source of conflict or emotional distress, usually depicting conjure as the source of the trouble. For example, in personal narrative of former slave Hannah Wyle, she discussed a story she heard about how a wife became completely deaf and dizzy with headaches because her husband left her while she was pregnant with their first child. The story considers her “to have been conjured”. This tale like many others provides the spiritual framework in which she interprets her misfortune. A similar rationalization is depicted in the folktale “Po Sandy” wherein slave Sandy was turned into a tree because she created a lust spell for a married man. It becomes evident here too, that supernaturalism serves as the source of her misfortune.²⁵ This recurring theme that adversity or conflict in one’s reflects supernatural agency is prevalent throughout slave narratives and folklore.

African American magic exists all around us today and in the past. It resonates in contemporary exhibitions of Voodoo in New Orleans, the rituals at African-American religious services, and in vibrant artistic forms throughout our museums. Thus, we must try and understand African American beliefs concerning the supernatural and where these ideas

²⁴ Granger, 27.

²⁵ Chestnutt, Charles. *The Conjuring Woman*. London: Book Jungle, 2008, 124.

originate. Folklore, narratives, autobiographies, and interviews have much to say about what magic has meant to the nearly 4 million enslaved people who resided in the antebellum South and forged a distinct culture.²⁶ Because of their experience of forced bondage and racial persecution, their perception of magic differed greatly from their European and European-American counterparts. Rather than inciting common associations of fear or danger, slaves' understanding of the supernatural world served as a necessary escape and espoused notions of spiritual empowerment.

²⁶ Granger, xi.

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