

A Quarterly Journal  
Humanities and Social Sciences  
Young Scholars Worldwide

# The Schola

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# III

# 7

Volume 7 | Issue III | September 2023

**MAGNA**

*Interdisciplinary:  
Anthropology, Theology, Women's Studies*

**Magical Spirituality: A Source of Self-Empowerment  
for African-American Women**

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**Abstract**

Slavery and Black migration to the Americas forced a coming together of populations from regions across the African continent, resulting in distinctive, broad magical spiritualities such as Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure, that drew on the formalized teachings and leadership elements of African religious traditions. As a system molded by the enslaved, magical practices attended to these peoples' most pressing issues. While institutionalized religions emphasized conformity as a means of empowering the community, informal magical practices emphasized independence as a means of empowering the individual. African-American women used magic as a vehicle to express and overcome their silenced grievances. Magic encouraged these women to explore their psychological landscapes by recognizing their capacity for independent thought and action. This paper analyzes the relationship between African-American women and magical practices, revealing how magic created opportunities for these women to assume leadership roles in the community, gain financial agency, and reverse standard racial and gender power dynamics. Moreover, this paper reviews recent scholarship and first-person accounts that trace magical practices into present times. The analysis aims to provide evidence that these practices continue to empower Black women much as they did historically, pointing to magic as a significant contributor to the foundation of modern Black feminism.

## Introduction

Magic was a central element of life in African-American communities of the early United States and often served as a method of communication between people.<sup>1</sup> As a practice, magic was common to communities in the American South, and it played a key role in domestic interactions between African-American men and women. Its accessibility appealed to many of the enslaved, and its capacity to mold to the desires of the individual attracted suppressed populations of women seeking agency. Magic is still relevant to the Black American experience today; many African Americans incorporate elements of magic into their spiritual lives, and contemporary African-American women create businesses based on the spiritual teachings taught by their mothers and grandmothers. Patricia Hill Collins, a noted scholar of Black feminism, describes the roots of modern American Black society in her foundational work, *Black Feminist Thought*:

Every social group has a constantly evolving worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences. For African-Americans, this worldview originated in the cosmologies of diverse West African ethnic groups. By retaining and reworking significant elements of these West African cultures, communities of enslaved Africans offered their members explanations for slavery alternatives to those advanced by slave owners. These African-derived ideas also laid the foundation for the rules of a distinctive Black American civil society.<sup>2</sup>

Given that Collins's words on the roots of Black society are framed by her analysis of Black feminism, the historical elements of magical practice itself may also be a part of the distinctive foundation Collins notes. Understanding how magic served women can help reveal the potential connections between these spiritual practices and modern Black feminism.

## Origins of Magic in the United States and Their Implications

Slavery and Black migration to the Americas forced a fusion of populations from regions across the African continent, resulting in the melding of previously distinct and independent cultures and traditions,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I will use "magic" as an umbrella term for Hoodoo, Voodoo, and similar belief systems emanating from Africa. For a perspective on the categorization of magic as religion, see Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> P. H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 30th Anniversary edn., New York: Routledge, 2022, 33.

including spiritualities. The combination of widely diverse religious and spiritual practices accentuated the cultural through-lines from which magic in the United States originated. Some American belief systems, such as Santeria and Voodoo, drew on the formalized teachings and leadership of African religious traditions. Other belief systems, such as Hoodoo, were more localized and individualistic. For example, Voodoo is structured around the worship of godly figures with ties to West African and Congolese religions and has historically been practiced by people of African descent in the Caribbean and in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In application, Voodoo involves rhythm and dance-centered rituals, and worship of the spirits in return for their supernatural aid. Voodoo and Hoodoo were both commonly practiced by enslaved peoples in the United States. Though similarly named and often conflated in modern colloquial usage, the two disciplines have important distinctions in application and cultural context. Hoodoo, sometimes referred to as Conjure, involved no god-like figures and was instead anchored in the creation of naturally derived mixtures and charms with the magical power to create the wielder's desired effect.<sup>4</sup> Compared to Voodoo, Hoodoo drew more influence from American Indigenous traditions and European folk magic.<sup>5</sup> In his dissertation, "Acquiescence and Dissent: Slave Religion and Conjure in the Antebellum South," Derek Pace describes the formation of American Hoodoo: "This smattering of beliefs and traditions that slaves carried over from different areas of the [African] continent formed the cultural basis from which Conjure eventually grew."<sup>6,7</sup> Although magic may seem alien to modern

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<sup>3</sup> A. Kordas, 'Hex Workers: African American Women, Hoodoo, and Power in the Nineteenth-and Early Twentieth-Century US,' *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs* vol. 3, no.8, 2016, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Hurston, 'Hoodoo in America,' *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. 44, no.174, 1931, 318.

<sup>5</sup> While Hoodoo and Voodoo differ in the amount of inspiration, they take from non-African spiritualities, many of the characteristics of both can be traced back to their African origins. On the topic of physical symbolism in spiritualities, Pace references the traditions of the BaKongo people, a group that occupies a portion of Africa's Atlantic coast. The BaKongo people interact with "nkisi," spirits who present themselves physically in the form of small items such as shells or carvings. Magical practices in America mirror these West African traditions – charms and elixirs central to Hoodoo mirror BaKongo encapsulations of the supernatural in naturally derived totems, and the presence of multiple nsiki matches the polytheism in Voodoo. See D. Pace, *Acquiescence and Dissent: Slave Religion and Conjure in the Antebellum South*, PhD diss., Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016, 13.

<sup>6</sup> D. Pace, *Acquiescence and Dissent*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Modern media often portray African spiritualities like Voodoo as malicious, satanic, and evil. Modern Voodoo priestess Jessyca Winston explains the racism behind these ideas efficiently, saying "The belief that Voodoo is evil and Voodoo is dark comes from the fact that Voodoo is black." In reality, African spiritualities cannot be satanic; they evolved independent of Christian ideas about the Devil. See S. Romblay, "This

conceptions of religion, Hoodoo, Voodoo and their attendant practices formed a prominent belief system with strong cultural significance. Collectively, these “. . . African-American philosophies shaped gender relations, family life, food preparation, medicinal practice, religion, and work.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Hoodoo: An Accessible Spiritual Practice Made by and for African Americans**

Early American Christianity, a doctrine molded by whites with almost exclusively male authority figures, was not made to attend to the issues most pressing to African Americans, particularly not African American women. “Christianity, with its focus on the afterlife and reliance on God for wellbeing, did not adequately address all of the issues that slaves faced in the plantation societies.”<sup>9</sup> The enslaved population’s inhumane suffering could not be explained by the Christians’ idea of a benevolent God. Henry Bibb, a Black Christian Methodist who escaped enslavement, captures Black apprehension surrounding his faith in a short anecdote:

[They preach that] God will send them to hell, if they disobey their masters. This kind of preaching has driven thousands into infidelity. They view themselves as suffering unjustly under the lash . . . without protection of law or gospel . . . And they cannot believe or trust in such a religion. . .<sup>10</sup>

The danger inherent to life as an African in the Americas, particularly in the era of slavery, necessitated a belief system that offered guidance in everyday conflicts and moral transgressions.<sup>11</sup> Thus, magic was able to offer the type of “protection” that Black people needed, but that the Christian gospel could not offer.

Characterized by individualization and accessibility, magical practices such as Hoodoo and Voodoo were distinct among the spiritualities of early America in their ability to speak to the masses and simultaneously entice individuals as a vehicle to express their otherwise silenced grievances. Magic, therefore, brought a form of elasticity to

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Priestess is Teaching Others the Truth about Vodou and Hoodoo,’ *Huffington Post*, Sept. 24, 2020, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/haus-of-hoodoo-vodou-nSouew-orleans\\_n\\_5f6cb31fc5b6e2c912623c13](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/haus-of-hoodoo-vodou-nSouew-orleans_n_5f6cb31fc5b6e2c912623c13) (accessed May 2023).

<sup>8</sup> L. A. Wilkie, ‘Secret and Sacred: Contextualizing the Artifacts of African-American Magic and Religion,’ *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, 82.

<sup>9</sup> D. Pace, *Acquiescence and Dissent*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> S. C. Milton, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999, 77.

<sup>11</sup> D. Pace, *Acquiescence and Dissent*, 22.

believers that was particularly appealing to the most marginalized populations, notably African-American women. Unlike many institutionalized churches, magic did not call on its Black followers to suppress their pain and frustrations. White preachers offered white-serving perspectives on enslavement that rejected the painful lived experience of the Black population.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Hoodoo *validated* the intense and intrinsically human emotions that Christianity sometimes dubbed “evils.”<sup>13</sup> As a system molded by the enslaved, persecuted community, Black belief in the supernatural “... undermined the ‘doctrine of Black Impotence’ that slave-owners and pro-slavery preachers promulgated.”<sup>14</sup> Hoodoo met people where they were, using resources that they had, in a way that was emotionally and physically relevant.

### **The Unique Accessibility of Magic: Enabling Individuals to Impart Power and Meaning to Familiar Objects**

Hoodoo was usually grounded in some physical act, but its meaning was understood spiritually.<sup>15</sup> Pace notes that “For many blacks in the antebellum South, the physical and supernatural were often inseparable. Studies that apply the Western notion of mutual exclusivity between the two fail to capture the dynamic nature of slave religious life.”<sup>16</sup> While institutionalized religions emphasized conformity as a means of empowering the community, informal magical practices emphasized independence as a means of empowering the *individual*. Thus, Hoodoo was appealing because it could be performed with very few resources. The personal allure and convenience of magical practices are perfectly encapsulated by the weaponized herb bottles that enslaved people across the Americas used to retaliate against their enslavers. “In

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<sup>12</sup> Often, enslaved populations came to regard white Christianity with contempt and disregarded its teachings because the Church did not follow its own tenets. See A. J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, 293-298.

<sup>13</sup> In her PhD dissertation, K. L. Martin attests that many of the negative connotations applied to African traditions performed by women are rooted in Christian literature from the mid-1000s. According to Martin, writers like Heinrich Kramer and Johannes Nider asserted that women’s spiritual weakness left them susceptible to the devil. Martin argues that “Nider’s text is also responsible for articulating the most common elements of witchcraft which have since become standard characteristics of the witch stereotype,” such as their most common/cliche misconduct (of the time), preference for nighttime, and partnership with the devil. See K. L. Martin, *Conjuring Moments and Other Such Hoodoo: African American Women & Spirit*, PhD diss., Tallahassee, Florida State University, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> D. Pace, *Acquiescence and Dissent*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

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

the Bahamas, bottles containing needles, herbs, and urine would be buried near houses to cause harm.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Bahaman bottles, magic was an easily accessible form of self-expression, using attainable and oftentimes completely free ingredients. Nearby, in the continental United States, the use of Conjure bags gives us another example of physical objects empowered by belief.

An African-American midwife described one such bag that she obtained to rid herself of a ghost: ‘After a time I went to a conjure woman to get to drive off the friendly pirate (the ghost). She made up a strong conjure bag with hog bristles and black cat’s hair and a rabbit’s foot and dirt from the graves of seven murderers and seven little stones from south-running water all tied up in a red flannel rag greased with snake oil and tied with dead woman’s hair.’<sup>18</sup>

So-called Conjure bags, medicinal consult Conjure women, and the aid of spirits addressed the immediate harms brought on by enslavement, abuse, and lynching. Hoodoo made emotional release facile for enslaved people and was therefore especially helpful to Black women.

### **Magic and Authority Roles for Women**

Magic in local communities was often performed by experienced and trained practitioners with a variety of specific skill sets ranging from practicing medicine to managing interpersonal conflicts. “Conjure woman,” a title often used to describe the societal role taken on by women with expertise in Hoodoo, is synonymous with terms like “hoodoo woman,” “root worker,” and “root doctor.”<sup>19</sup> Parallel roles exist in other African diasporic religions such as the title “Priestess” in Voodoo. These terms were all used to describe spiritual authorities who used their knowledge of local botany to create herbal remedies for physical ills.

As in formal medicine, some of the doctors are general practitioners, and some are specialists. ...All of the hoodoo doctors have non-conjure cases. They prescribe folk medicine, “roots”, and are for this reason called “two-headed doctors”. Most of the prescriptions have to do with birth and social diseases. There is no formal training

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<sup>17</sup> L. A. Wilkie, ‘Secret and Sacred,’ 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Although these practitioners were generally thought of as women, there is some controversy as to whether areas of magical expertise were gender specific. Wilkie concludes that “Magical specialists did not seem to be gender-exclusive roles, although midwives were likely to be women who had already raised their own children, and were beyond their childbearing years ...” See L. A. Wilkie, ‘Secret and Sacred,’ 85.

for this. Either men or women may take it up. Often they are not hoodoo doctors, but all hoodoo doctors also practice medicine.<sup>20</sup>

As problem solvers, Conjure women also prescribed customers multi-step spells involving concoctions, incantations, sequential acts, and other instructions to address any number of issues, including ways to gain the upper hand in disagreements or conflicts. For example, in *Hoodoo in America*, groundbreaking anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston details the various spells intended to resolve social conflicts doled out by Ruth Mason, a Hoodoo doctor of the time; “To Move Neighbors;” “To Break a Friendship;” “To Find Out Secret Enemies;” and “To Revenge yourself Upon a Man.”<sup>21</sup> Hurston also tells us that Mason’s dispensations made her famous, attesting to her power in the community. Practitioners often received high pay for their services. Hurston notes that Ruth Mason once received 100 dollars for service in 1928.<sup>22</sup> Thus we see that providing these services necessitated transactions, bestowing the Conjurer with financial agency, security, and respect.

Much like local priests who gained power and standing via perceived proximity to God, Conjure women received respect and reverence from customers for their wisdom and spiritual command.<sup>23</sup> Practitioners were also admired for their practical skills and problem-solving roles. In her article on hex workers, Anne Kordas writes, “The ability to cure, to bring luck, to harm, to protect, to predict the future, and potentially to alter the course of history gave hoodoo women great power within their communities.”<sup>24</sup> The Conjure woman’s role as a multi-faceted and effective problem-solver contradicts notions of women as dependent upon men and ascribes wisdom seldom attributed to Black people at the time.

### **Magic as a Vehicle for Granting Power to Blacks and Women**

Many magic rituals and recipes gave Black women exceptional power over others. For example, some Conjure women believed they could use their magic to interfere with the justice system:

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<sup>20</sup> Z. Hurston, ‘Hoodoo in America,’ 320.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 376-378.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>23</sup> “Women are revered in African traditions as essential to the cosmic balance of the world.” See J. K. Olupona, ‘Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions,’ *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring/Summer 2021, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/rethinking-the-study-of-african-indigenous-religions/> (accessed May, 2023)

<sup>24</sup> A. Kordas. ‘Hex Workers,’ 5.



Among the specialties of some hoodoo women were “courthouse spells,” which reputedly had the power to interfere with police investigations, silence witnesses, dissuade juries from finding defendants guilty, and encourage judges to impose lenient sentences on the convicted.<sup>25</sup>

Certain famous Conjurers, such as Mary Leveau of New Orleans, were said to have used their powers to influence legal proceedings.<sup>26</sup> Hurston dedicates a portion of her paper, *Hoodoo in America*, to Leveau, whom she called “the greatest Hoodoo queen of America.”<sup>27</sup> According to Hurston, “People feared Hoodoo in general and Mary Leveau in particular.”<sup>28</sup> Leveau’s power seems to have extended even over *white* authority figures of the time. Hurston tells of how “When she lived in St. Anne Street the police tried to raid her place. One came and she confounded him . . . she did some work at her altar and put the whole force to sleep on her steps.”<sup>29</sup> Whether or not Mary Leveau confronted and disarmed the police, her practice of Conjure gave her a powerful reputation that was threatening even to white law enforcement. Similar incidents occurred in other parts of the country and had similar results. For example, a New York Times article from 1880 tells of defense witnesses who were intimidated by rumors that the plaintiff was a Voodoo priestess.

Suit for absolute divorce has been brought by a colored woman named Agamon against a colored man named Charles Trice . . . Counsel for the latter claims that his witnesses are afraid to testify against the plaintiff because she is a Voodoo priestess. The case was sent to a Referee.<sup>30</sup>

Here again, we see that even an unsubstantiated claim of a woman practicing magic carried weight, a societal acknowledgment of the power of these female practitioners.

Thus, the use of Hoodoo and Conjure became ways for African-American women to use spirituality to transcend prejudice, exercise power over the dominant race, and sometimes gain income in the process. Kordas explains the unusual sway that came with magical expertise, “Hoodoos, unlike most African Americans, could manipulate the behavior of whites and gain assistance from them in times of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Z. Hurston, ‘Hoodoo in America,’ 326.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Brooklyn,’ *The New York Times*, August 25, 1880, 8.

need.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, white people themselves sought the consultation of Conjure women, crossing racial barriers to access their wisdom.<sup>32</sup> “Ethnohistorical data clearly demonstrate that many Euromericans [Americans of European descent] consulted African-American conjurers for magical assistance.”<sup>33</sup> Concern about serious diseases sometimes brought whites to Hoodoo doctors, who were also convinced of the Conjurers’ powers.<sup>34</sup> The crucial roles that Conjure women played gave them importance and standing as healthcare providers, community leaders, and business owners. Moreover, their acclaim allowed them to sometimes reverse standard power dynamics temporarily between whites and Blacks.

### **Magic as a Vehicle for Mental and Emotional Liberation**

In a broad sense, magic authorized oppressed populations, particularly African-American women, to direct *themselves*, rather than submit to outside authority. Hoodoo encouraged female participants to *act* on their ambitions, independent of approval from others. Magical practices encouraged African-American women to explore their psychological landscapes. Spells and recipes for relationship success, business success, sabotage, etc. served as a catalog of emotion-driven actions for women to pick from, and the existence of this ‘catalog’ effectively permitted women to express, rather than suppress, themselves.

Magic’s capacity for expression could be used to challenge the authority of the early American patriarchal system imposed by whites, specifically the expectation that women should submit to their husbands. While African-American gender roles were relatively equal during slavery in comparison to standard white household dynamics, emancipation eventually led to the adoption of white patriarchal norms in Black society.<sup>35</sup> The use of magic among African Americans seemed to resist normalizing an imbalance between men and women. In *Secret and Sacred: Contextualizing the Artifacts of African-American Magic and Religion*, Laurie Wilkie argues that magic could be used within romantic relationships to disrupt patriarchy: “A man and woman engaged in a sexual relationship and cohabiting in a house without plumbing have a great deal of access to those bodily substances which are most potentially harmful to their

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<sup>31</sup> A. Kordas. ‘Hex Workers,’ 5.

<sup>32</sup> D. Pace, *Acquiescence and Dissent*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> L. A. Wilkie, ‘Secret and Sacred,’ 83.

<sup>34</sup> “‘Voodoo Queens,’ one white writer proclaimed, “know far more [about dangerous plants] than many modern botanists.”” See A. Kordas. ‘Hex Workers,’ 2.

<sup>35</sup> C. Morris, ‘Black Slave Gender Roles How They Were Changed by Emancipation,’ *Proceedings of GREAT Day*, vol. 2010 (Article 17), 2010, 125-130.

mate . . . The family must trust its members not to harm each other either directly or indirectly.”<sup>36</sup> As a tool provided to both men and women, magic could level the playing field of each household; not only were women dependent on a man’s reliability, but men were also dependent on the reliability of women. Magic created opportunities for a woman to harm or be disloyal to her male partner, recognizing her capacity for independent thought and action. Hurston gives many examples of Hoodoo spells with titles like: “The Lady Who Cannot Face Her Landlord;” “The Lady Who Lost Her Lover;” “The Lady Who Had An Empty House;” “The Lady Who Lost Her Business;” and “To Keep a Man True.”<sup>37</sup> Hoodoo served as a means of acquiring power for women seeking financial stability, or control over their relationships, or status in their communities. In essence, these rituals provided a foundation for female autonomy.

Not only was magic present during marriage but also in the context of romantic non-marital relationships. In her research, Wilkie finds “Magical spells abound that are intended to destroy marriages, lead another woman’s husband away, or bind a man’s or woman’s affection to another and so forth.”<sup>38,39</sup> Control in relationships was particularly important after Emancipation – the necessity for men to travel great distances to find work created opportunities for infidelity.

Following the end of slavery, African American women still faced the problem of “wandering” spouses who, while traveling in search of work, might become involved with other women. “Wandering” husbands likewise feared that their wives might seek the attention of other men while they were gone.<sup>40</sup>

This culture recognized women not as passive objects to be owned, but rather as marital *partners* that needed to be won over. Furthermore, the idea that men needed magical aid to persuade any woman to stay in a relationship implies that women had at least some autonomy when it came to maintaining intimate personal relationships.

While magic-centered spirituality advanced ideas of female agency, it is important to note that the aspirations of women were often constrained by a male-centered worldview. For example, several Hoodoo traditions had to do with women luring in, trapping, or binding

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<sup>36</sup> L. A. Wilkie, ‘Secret and Sacred,’ 91.

<sup>37</sup> Z. Hurston, ‘Hoodoo in America,’ 331-361.

<sup>38</sup> L. A. Wilkie, ‘Secret and Sacred,’ 91.

<sup>39</sup> “. . .many African Americans placed great faith in the power of the love charms that were made for them by hoodoos and continued to believe in their efficacy despite all evidence to the contrary.” A. Kordas. ‘Hex Workers,’ 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

themselves to men. While this narrative is minimizing in its portrayal of female ambition, uses of magic at least take the step of giving women an otherwise unattainable measure of agency in their relationships with men. Magic was a spirituality for the individual and a guiding force for many, but more than anything it provided an alternative school of thought to a population of women subjected to patriarchy.

### **The Persistence of Magic and its Presence in Modern Black American Culture**

Given the decline in religiosity in America during the 20th and 21st centuries,<sup>41</sup> one might infer that belief in magic dissipated. However, modern scholars have traced the presence of magical practices through post-abolition times, through the 20th century, and into the present day. Black society's cultural connection to magic has been preserved through stories and traditions passed down from generation to generation, thus continuing its influence on African Americans today. In an interview with PBS, Professor Kameelah Martin says, "The tradition didn't go away. It just went underground. It just evolved into something different."<sup>42</sup>

Oral records tell us that women still used magic in their everyday lives in the late 20th century. A 1975 survey entitled "Hoodoo Tales in Indiana" records stories from nine Indiana University students who related their direct experiences with magic. Many of these stories include recipes that share characteristics with the spells documented by Hurston forty-four years earlier. "Paralysis and Queen Ann," told by Pearlie M., age 35, recounts how Pearlie's mother became paralyzed by a cursed object from her husband's secret lover and was helped by a Conjure woman named "Queen Ann."

My mother became ill and the doctors really didn't know what was wrong with her. She couldn't help herself up or use her body at all. So finally we took her to a lady called Queen Ann who suppose to have been able to cast demons out . . . Queen Ann looked at her for a while and then told us to take her back out, and then she told us to go home and look in the west, the southwest corner of her bedroom. To strip, take up the linoleum and things that were on the floor and in that southwest corner, ah

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, 'Belief in God in US Dips to 81%, a New Low,' *Gallup News*, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/393737/belief-god-dips-new-low.aspx>, (accessed July 15, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> K. L. Martin, "Uncovering the Power of Hoodoo: An Ancestral Journey" [television broadcast], PBS Voices, 2023, aired May 16, 2023.

whatever we find, to take a metal shovel and shovel it up, and then take lye, ammonia, and scrub the entire room and repaint and everything.

And so we went home and sure enough in that corner under the linoleum was a dark ugly-looking ball of something and we did scoop it up and take it out and put it in an open fire outside and burned it . . . by the time we had finished the cycle she was back to normal.<sup>43</sup>

This story is reminiscent of early Hoodoo spells that offered recipes for ridding oneself of a curse such as “The Lady Who Wishes to Be Uncrossed,”<sup>44</sup> which similarly instructs the hexed to pay attention to corners of rooms and to scrub the floor. Another tale recounted in the 1975 survey, “Love Potions,” touches on magic as a way for women to gain control in romantic relationships. Ms. Marilyn B., age 30, recalls as a child hearing her mother and her friends talking about love potions as the best method to seduce men.

Well . . . all I could do is remember things I used to hear my mother and older ladies sitting around the house talking about when I was a kid and I was supposed to be playing . . . I do remember two or three incidences I heard my mother and some of the older ladies talking about and they would say that the best way for a woman to get to her man was to fix him; and of course they say the best way to fix somebody was . . . through something that they ate . . . Well, they said that through urine and they said that this one lady made a habit of *peeing* in her husband’s food.<sup>45</sup>

This story also shares traits with many spells in *Hoodoo in America*, for example, “To Make One Love You,” which instructs a woman to regain her lover by adding her urine to his food.<sup>46</sup> As a part of family culture, magic contributed to the late 20th-century environment in which Pearlle M. and Ms. Marilyn B. were raised. Similarities between their accounts and examples from the early 20th century show a retention of common features in magic, such as the prominence of Conjure women like Queen Ann, the use of hexed objects for malicious social intent, and the popularity of methods for controlling relationships. The fact that these common features have carried on in magic demonstrates that they were useful in survival. Martin summarizes magic’s integral role in

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<sup>43</sup> E. Kullii, ‘Hoodoo Tales Collected in Indiana,’ *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, vol. 16 (no. 1/2), 1979, 77.

<sup>44</sup> Z. Hurston, ‘Hoodoo in America,’ 333.

<sup>45</sup> E. Kullii, ‘Hoodoo Tales Collected in Indiana,’ 91.

<sup>46</sup> Z. Hurston, ‘Hoodoo in America,’ 372.

African American survival, saying, “You and I are able to sit here today because our ancestors at some point believed and persevered because they had Conjure and Hoodoo and Voodoo and all these different spiritual traditions that allowed them to survive.”<sup>47</sup>

Moving to the present day, evidence of the current adherence to magic in the African-American community can be found in the Pew Research Center’s 2021 study on “Faith Among Black Americans.” While the Pew researchers acknowledge that few Blacks are committed to African diasporic religions, they discovered that otherwise affiliated worshippers still engage in *elements* of magical religion such as ancestor worship; consultations with diviners; and burning candles, incense, or sage for spiritual purposes.<sup>48</sup> The survey also revealed that most Black Americans believe that evil spirits can cause problems in people’s lives,<sup>49</sup> demonstrating that Voodoo-type beliefs survive in this community.

The same adherence to magic discovered by the Pew researchers is reflected in modern Black women’s testimonies. Interviews conducted by CNBC and Huffington Post support the theory that magic has been passed down through familial oral histories into the 21st century and has reached the consciousnesses of Black women today.<sup>50,51</sup> These women have credited their grandmothers with teaching them magical traditions,<sup>52,53</sup> and recent scholarly work on the Black female use of magic affirms the importance of grandmothers as spiritual teachers.<sup>54</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, an expert in African religious traditions, explains the rise in popularity of magic among Black women: “African American women are turning more and more to goddess religions and [West African religious] practices, as they find African religion offering them

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<sup>47</sup> K. L. Martin, “Uncovering the Power of Hoodoo: An Ancestral Journey,” 2023.

<sup>48</sup> T. Thompson et al., *Meet the Entrepreneurs using African Spirituality to Create Businesses*, from CNBC [video], Feb. 19, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/19/black-women-entrepreneurs-find-niche-in-spirituality-inspired-business.html?&qsearchterm=African%20Spirituality%20to%20create%20businesses>, (accessed May, 2023).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>50</sup> T. Thompson et al., *Meet the Entrepreneurs* [video], (Feb. 19, 2022).

<sup>51</sup> S. Romblay, ‘This Priestess is Teaching Others the Truth about Vodou and Hoodoo,’ *Huffington Post*, Sept. 24, 2020, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/haus-of-hoodoo-vodou-new-orleans\\_n\\_5f6cb31fc5b6e2c912623c13](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/haus-of-hoodoo-vodou-new-orleans_n_5f6cb31fc5b6e2c912623c13) (accessed May 2023).

<sup>52</sup> T. Thompson et al., *Meet the Entrepreneurs* [video], (Feb. 19, 2022).

<sup>53</sup> S. Romblay, ‘This Priestess is Teaching Others the Truth about Vodou and Hoodoo,’ *Huffington Post*, Sept. 24, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> K. L. Martin, “Uncovering the Power of Hoodoo: An Ancestral Journey,” 2023.

greater religious autonomy than other Western religions.”<sup>55</sup> Olupona’s explanation of the draws of magic in the modern day mirrors the draws it held for Black women in the early United States as an alternative to white, patriarchal, and institutionalized theologies.

Today, magic creates opportunities for Black female practitioners to profit from their practice, while celebrating their ancestral cultures and uplifting other women. CNBC, the business news network, has noted a recent “surge”<sup>56</sup> in spiritual businesses. For example, Shontel Anastasia, an American woman of Caribbean, Indian, and African descent, owns a profitable business called the “Urban Gurvi Mama Shop.” “I started the Urban Gurvi Mama Shop due to the Afro-Cuban traditions that my grandma actually taught me at a young age, so I wanted to create a shop that was specifically for women, that not only guided them but taught them. . . . My grandma always told me my hands, my hands were powerful.” Notably, Anastasia transitioned from the white and male-dominated corporate world to the spiritual industry and found that she has done well, even as a Black, female small business owner.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Jessyka Winston, a Voodoo Priestess and the owner of the “Haus of Hoodoo” in New Orleans, uses her magic-oriented business to uplift women. In a 2020 interview, Winston described how burning her “success candles” and “job candles” has helped her clients achieve life goals, and how her advice has taught them to prioritize their own needs over the needs of their male family members. “Every day I’m fulfilled and rewarded whenever I hear that someone benefitted from my work.”<sup>58</sup> These women are generating businesses that cater to Black women and encourage self-love and empowerment through magic, echoing the self-preservation, philosophy, and ingenuity of their Conjure women ancestors.

## Conclusion

By molding magic to their needs, Black women contributed dynamic and woman-centric elements to African-American culture. The ease of obtaining magically significant objects and ingredients made it a convenient practice for the under-resourced African-American population and enabled believers to create their catharsis through spells, curses, and concoctions. In their positions as magical practitioners,

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<sup>55</sup> J. K. Olupona, ‘Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions,’ *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring/Summer 2021, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/rethinking-the-study-of-african-indigenous-religions/> (accessed May, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> T. Thompson et al., *Meet the Entrepreneurs* [video], (Feb. 19, 2022).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> S. Romblay, ‘This Priestess is Teaching Others the Truth about Vodou and Hoodoo,’ *Huffington Post*, Sept. 24, 2020.

Conjure women were able to earn an income and gain social standing. In essence, these women found a way to define their power, becoming pioneers of Black female autonomy in the process. This power allowed them to sometimes bypass white patriarchal systems of control. Magical practices required agency from their female followers, contradicting notions of Black women as passive chattel. Magical spells and concoctions offered them mechanisms for emotional release and self-assertion. Magic's continuation as a cultural heirloom has preserved its role as a source of female independence. Today, magic creates opportunities for African-American women to become business owners, celebrate their culture, and support other women. Its integral role in uplifting Black women throughout American history points to magic as a cornerstone in the foundation of modern Black feminism. As Patricia Collins tells us,

US Black women participated in constructing and reconstructing these oppositional knowledges [resisting injustice while remaining subjugated]. Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. ... These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported.<sup>59</sup>

Given the historical evidence and modern testimony by Black women that magical practices empower them, further exploration of the connections between magic practiced by Black women in the early United States and modern Black feminism promises to increase awareness of this overlooked but powerful tool for building social resilience.

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<sup>59</sup> P. H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 30th Anniversary edn., New York: Routledge, 2022, 33.



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