CHAPTER 7

The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices

YVONNE CHIREAU

African American people are heirs to a religious diversity inspired by the meeting of old and the new worlds. African at its roots and American in its orientation, black sacred culture is a vibrant mélange of traditions, theologies, and styles. Part of the richness of African American spirituality derives from its complexity, the distinctive interplay of multiple meanings within unified conceptual frameworks and categories. An enduring element of the religious experience of black people in the United States is *supernaturalism*, a perspective that acknowledges the accessibility and efficacy of the spiritual realm in human life. This chapter is a preliminary exploration of the historical functions and meanings of supernaturalism, focusing on African American women and the significance of supernatural practices for women in black communities in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

Historically, black American women's spirituality has extended well beyond the physical boundaries of church, mosque, and temple. However, in studying the spiritual experiences of black women many scholars have privileged institutionalized religious activities over those traditions that emerged external to ecclesial and parochial associations. Numerous studies have documented African American women's roles within the Christian denominations, independent networks, movements of organizational reform, and community-building efforts, but few have investigated the varied, elaborate meanings that emerge when women create alternative avenues for sacred self-expression *outside* of these established channels. Consequently, the history of African American women's spiritual lives consists of much uncharted territory.[1]

1. On black women and religion see Evelyn Brooks, "The Feminist Theology of the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1900," in *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control*, ed. Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lessinger (Boston, 1983); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Together and in Harness': Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs* 10 (Summer 1985); Jualynne Dodson, "Nineteenth-Century A. M. E. Preaching Women," in Hilah Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, *Women in New Worlds* (Nashville, 1981); Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14 (Spring 1989). An extensive (though uneven) bibliography is Marilyn Richardson's *Black Women and Religion: A Bibliography* (Boston, 1980).

Magic or Religion?

A perspective that emphasizes the supernatural elements in African American sacred culture can help to reorient historians' approaches to religion. We might start with the very terms we use to understand these practices. For example, when it is not part of the practitioners' conceptual framework, the word *magic* can be problematic. As used by historians, *magic* typically describes activities that are private, illicit, and coercive of spiritual powers, while *religion* primarily refers to those practices which are public, liturgical, and institutionalized.[2] As historian Natalie Zemon Davis has noted, these distinctions often have limited application to actual experience. She suggests that the magic/religion dichotomy carries unnecessary baggage and is therefore too narrow to be of practical use to the historian: "a premature evaluation of the functions of religion and magic, an insistence on sorting their function into those which are 'rational' and those which are not, may limit our historical insight unduly . . . We continue to examine distinctions between religion and magic, Christian and pagan, rational and primitive as they are made in varying ways . . . as evidence about the periods, not as categories which exhaust the possibilities for our analysis."[3] The typological distinction between magic and religion has not precluded the convergence of both categories within African American sacred traditions, where magical and religious elements are often combined. As I employ it, *supernaturalism* is a more appropriate term of description for this broad sphere of belief and practice, referring to a cluster of ideas concerning suprahuman agents and spiritual efficacy that includes traditional conceptions of divinity and other spiritual forces.

Among black Americans, ideas of the supernatural and the accessibility of supernatural powers have been passed down from early generations of slaves to their descendants in the present day. In particular, the practice of *conjure* has occupied a principal location in black folk tradition for at least two centuries. Conjure, or as it is known by its various appellations, *hoodoo*, *voodoo*, *rootworking*, *mojo*, or *goopher*, is the ritual harnessing of spiritual forces in order to heal, to harm, to predict the future, and to influence individuals or events.[4] As a magico-religious system, conjure was most

2. From the formulations derived from the sociologists of religion Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. See Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, 1915), and Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (Boston, 1972).

3. Natalie Z. Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkhaus and Heiko Oberman (Leiden, 1974), p. 312.

4. *Conjure* is a term from the African American folk vernacular that refers to supernatural practices and powers. Prior to this time, the word *conjure* was used primarily by whites to refer to the sleight-of-hand tricks and performances of professional magicians. Other terms, as they are employed by blacks, vary by region. The sources of some words, like *goopher* or *voodoo*, are arguably African, but *conjure* is the appelation which comes into most common usage by the nineteenth century. See Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill, 1926), pp. 15–20.

widespread among black slave populations in the United States during the early 1800s, but its roots predate this period by at least a hundred years. Accounts of conjure and conjuring among blacks were central to the cultural narratives perpetuated by African Americans in the oral tradition. As a supernatural system of belief and practice, conjure continues to draw freely from black religion and folklore.[5]

The Roots of Black Supernaturalism

To find the origins of conjure and supernaturalism one must go back to the initial encounters between Africans and Europeans in the American colonies. Cruelly enslaved, Africans were brought to the New World as laborers under brutal and inhumane conditions. Separated from their homelands, divorced from their native social and religious institutions, slaves forged relationships with white colonists that were defined by conflict and subjugation. In early America, black and white worldviews clashed and occasionally reinforced each other. The diverse impulses of post-Reformation Christianity in Europe informed popular notions of the invisible world, occultism, and the efficacy of holy objects. Many of these themes made their way to the colonies, redefining the barriers that church authorities had cast between supernaturalism and religion. Ultimately, the "worlds of wonder" that so captivated white colonists became a source of enrichment for African American sacred consciousness.[6] As historian Mechal Sobel has argued with respect to Africans and Anglican settlers in colonial Virginia, similarities in the two groups' perceptions of space, time, and the natural environment made for a "social-cultural" interplay of black and white perspectives:

> In the traditional cultures of both peoples the natural world was seen as a place of mystery and hidden powers that had to be taken into account. Africans

5. There are several published collections of African American magic and folk beliefs: 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. (Hannibal, Mo., 1970–78); Wayland Hand, ed., *The Frank Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, vol. 7 (Chapel Hill, 1964), and regional studies, such as Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens, Ga., 1940), Ray Browne, *Popular Beliefs and Practices from Alabama* (Berkeley, 1958), and Federal Writers Program, *South Carolina Folk Tales* (Columbia, S.C., 1941). There are no such collected works dating from the nineteenth century, but see the materials reprinted in Bruce Jackson, ed., *The Negro and his Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Austin, 1967), and Donald Waters, ed., *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams: Folklore from the Hampton Institute* (Boston, 1983).

6. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 151–63. See also Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1976). See also Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, 1987).

coming to America did not have a deviant rational tradition, but their view of the natural world was very close to the traditional view of most English people. Taboos were highly important; ritual acts were seen as having efficacy; holy places, holy times, and holy people could affect spirit or power. In this area of perceptions and values the possibility of confluence and melding was strong.[7]

Many beliefs were not completely unfamiliar. Europeans and Africans both tapped into a galaxy of otherworldly visions, including ideas concerning the mediation of the dead and the powers of unseen entities. As Africans were exposed to the spiritual imagination of whites, they absorbed many ideas that were compatible with their own. Practitioners of astrology, divination, and fortune-telling attracted both whites and blacks, and various occult activities thrived in the American colonies. Moreover, the cultural influences went both ways. Evidence indicates that whites borrowed heavily from African slave traditions, including folk beliefs in witches, ghosts, spirits, and other forces. Undeniably, early American folk tradition possessed black and white roots.[8]

Throughout the colonial period, traces of the supernatural pervaded the spiritual consciousness of blacks. But by the late 1700s dynamic new religious configurations stimulated the revivalism of the First Great Awakening and, later, the Second. African American culture blossomed in this lively environment of spiritual renewal. At the end of the eighteenth century the first independent African American churches were established, and slaves and free blacks converted to Christianity in increasing numbers. Many of these converts embellished their understandings of the Christian faith with visions that incorporated images and symbols from their African heritage. Nevertheless, the black embrace of evangelical Christianity represented only part of the religious picture. By the nineteenth century, slaves and freeborn blacks had developed a significant body of practices and beliefs, ones that were complementary rather than hostile to the interests and expressions of Christianity.[9]

A determination of the extent and significance of these complementary spiritual ideas among blacks has relied largely upon the remarks of

7. Sobel, *World They Made Together*, pp. 5, 78.

8. Beneath the mass of African American folk beliefs throughout the old South, for example, lies a storehouse of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European legend and lore. See Sobel, *World They Made Together*, pp. 97–99. On the cross-fertilization of black and European supernatural beliefs, see Tom Peete Cross, "Witchcraft in North Carolina," *Studies in Philology* 16 (July 1919); Norman Whitten, "Contemporary Patterns of Malign Occultism among Negroes in North Carolina," *Journal of American Folklore* 75 (1962), pp. 311–25. Newbell Niles Puckett, "Religious Folk Beliefs of Whites and Negroes," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (1931), pp. 9–35.

9. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, chap. 2; Levine, *Black Culture*, pp. 55–80.

nineteenth-century observers, who have often described African American religion with scorn or amusement. "In all instances which I remember to have noticed with reference to such fact," wrote one South Carolina plantation owner, "I have found among the religious slaves of the south traces . . . of a blending of superstition and fetichism, modifying their impressions of Christianity." Traveling in Virginia in the 1850s, the writer Frederick Law Olmsted observed that while a good portion of black folk were churchgoers, their religion was dominated by "a miserable system of superstition, the more painful that it employs some forms and words connected with true Christianity." Almost thirty years later, folklorist William Owens corroborated the presence of a strange admixture of Christianity and supernaturalism, remarking that black "American-born superstitions" were "interwoven with so-called religious beliefs," and represented "a horrible debasement of some of the highest and noblest doctrines of the Christian faith."[10] The frequent use of the term *superstition* by these commentators is a key indicator of the widespread perception that African American religion possessed supernatural elements. What were these elements, and what was their significance to the culture of the slaves?

Slavery and Supernaturalism

Religion was one of the foundations of black life in nineteenth-century America. Christian ideology informed the development of most of the primary institutions of African Americans, including their churches, voluntary associations, and schools. To the slaves, an oppressed and subjugated people, religious faith and community were significant sources of solace and comfort. The African worldview contributed a further, powerful dimension to the kind of Christianity that the slaves practiced. Belief in human access to an unseen world, a world that addressed specific concerns for power and control within the domain of the unpredictable, formed the bedrock of black folk religion. Anxieties involving the fear of punishment and abuse, possible sale and separation, and the unforeseeable risks of attempting to escape, were all part of the slaves' daily experience. Many of these concerns were addressed by a vast network of supernatural ideas. Slaves resorted to conjure, for example, when they confronted the physical threat of violence. Some slaves carried conjuring charms or amulets; some engaged in rituals that they believed would deter whippings and other forms of abuse; others wore protective "voodoo bags" on their persons or used powders, roots, and

10. Charles Raymond, "The Religious Life of the Negro Slave," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1863, p. 816; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey to the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853–1854, with Remarks on their Economy* (New York, 1856), p. 114; William Owens, "Folklore of the Southern Negroes," *Lippincott's Magazine* 20 (Dec. 1877), reprinted in Jackson, *The Negro and His Folklore*, p. 146.

potions that would shield them from unanticipated attacks by cruel slaveholders and slave drivers. Furthermore, conjure offered protection to the slave who dared to fight, rebel, or engage in destructive acts of sabotage. Supernatural beliefs thus had important functions for enslaved African Americans—they were a means of coping with and resisting slaveholder domination in situations of limited alternatives, and they were a culturally validated source of spiritual power.[11]

Written sources on African American conjure in the nineteenth century include narratives by former slaves, journals and diaries, and occasional firsthand accounts and commentaries. Abolitionists Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown are two widely quoted authors who describe male plantation conjurers in their autobiographies.[12] Lesser-known portraits of female conjurers by antebellum writers allow for a more balanced picture of black women's roles as supernatural authorities in slave communities. The journal of British actress Frances Kemble, for example, provides a rare glimpse of an enslaved African American woman, Sinda, who possessed the gift of second sight. Sinda, according to Kemble's account, was so respected for her supernatural powers and predictions that when she prophesied that the end of the world was imminent, other slaves refused to work any longer, even upon pain of punishment. As a powerful prophetess acknowledged by other slaves, Sinda was not unique. A nineteenth-century journalist in North Carolina described a plantation slave woman who was believed to be "in communication with occult powers" and endowed with the gift of clairvoyance. "Her utterances were accepted as oracles, and piously heeded," remarked an observer, "for it was believed that "she could see through the mists that hide the future from others."[13]

Other bondswomen used supernatural powers to participate in a clandestine system of occult subversion. Incidents recorded in the journal of James Henry Hammond, the proslavery ideologue of South Carolina, demonstrate the symbolic impact of supernaturalism in undermining the integrity of the slave system. Hammond, who was frustrated by the rampant destructiveness of conjurers on his estate, tried to root out and punish all blacks who were involved with occult activities, but he met with little success. In 1835 a female slave named Urana helped other slaves to steal wine from

11. Levine, *Black Culture*, pp. 70–75; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 281–88; Elliot Gorn, "Black Magic: Folk Beliefs of the Slave Community," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, ed. Ronald Numbers and Todd Savitt (Baton Rouge, 1989), pp. 308–16.

12. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845), p. 81; William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People* (New York, 1880), pp. 90–92.

13. Frances Ann Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838–1839* (New York, 1863), p. 119; Elwyn Barron, "Shadowy Memories of Negro Lore," *The Folklorist* (Chicago, 1892): 50; see also Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York, 1985), p. 41.

Hammond's cellar. She apparently employed supernatural powers to "screen" those involved in the theft from his detection. As Hammond's biographer notes, this incident challenged his attempt at the total domination of his slaves, since what Urana had accomplished "lay entirely outside his system of control." The other slaves' belief that Urana was protecting them supernaturally allowed them to contest Hammond's ownership of property and his power over them—the foundations of his authority.[14]

These examples illustrate black women's supernatural empowerment, a fact that the historiographical focus on Christianity among slaves has obscured. It is likely that male preachers and female conjurers participated equally as spiritual leaders within African American slave communities. Such an equality would have been consistent with women's roles among enslaved blacks in the nineteenth century: bondswomen and bondsmen had complementary functions and participated in a nonhierarchical sexual division of labor within the private arena, even as their productive and reproductive capacities were ultimately subject to slaveholder demands. Similarly, enslaved female conjurers operated on a level of parity with male conjurers. Equal access to the supernatural world tended to level out gender-based hierarchies for African American males and females, particularly within the spiritual arena.

Conjure in the Black Community

While supernaturalism was a way of confronting the oppressiveness of slavery, the functions of conjure were primarily internal, and had little direct impact upon relations between blacks and whites. African Americans adopted supernatural beliefs to address their own specific concerns, such as healing and health. Among slaves and their descendants, for example, supernatural folk traditions were an important way of conceptualizing sickness; disease was often thought to have spiritual causes. One became unhealthy, it was commonly believed, because another person had "wished it," or because one was the object of someone's "bad feelings." Chronic sicknesses that did not respond to conventional treatment were considered to be the consequence of malign powers or forces. As historian Albert Raboteau has noted, this understanding of affliction placed random causes within an explanatory social context. "Slaves believed adversity was due not to fate or mere happenstance," he states, "but to the ill will of someone working through a conjurer."[15] For many blacks, supernaturalism revealed *why* suffering occurred and indicated *who* or *what* was responsible, thus explaining and locating the disease or misfortune within communally based

14. Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge, 1982), p. 93.

15. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 276.

norms and idioms of the spiritual world. Furthermore, conjure and other beliefs offered numerous possibilities for remedying distressing situations, thereby facilitating individual agency and empowerment.

Such beliefs concerning the supernatural causes of disease and illness were salient among African Americans long after emancipation, especially among black women, who historically were entrusted with primary healing roles in slave and free communities. The recollections of educators and missionaries working among former slaves on the Sea Islands suggest that supernatural perspectives toward sickness were still viable early in the twentieth century. The following conversation between a New England schoolteacher, Grace Bigelow House, and an elderly black woman illuminates the manner in which some African Americans systematized their perspectives of physical ailments:

> One of the older women . . . had an affliction which she said no "medical doctor cayn' cure." "I had dis affliction before," she said, "and I been to Parris Island doctor and all de doctors, an' dey say it could do no good."
>
> "But you can tell me what the sickness is like?"
>
> . . . shaking her head, "dey is some illness come from God, and some come from man!"
>
> "Do you think this sickness came from God?" asked Miss House.
>
> ". . . No," she whispered, "No, no! Dishyuh sickness came from man."
>
> "Do you think some one wished some evil on you?"
>
> "Yes," came back the expected answer in a whisper.[16]

Similar notions of affliction circulated throughout the South and in other parts of the United States where blacks settled. The following testimony of an emancipated slave woman in Texas indicates that a variety of possibilities—sinful deeds, poor labor conditions, and supernaturalism—were all considered as explanations for the blindness that struck her unexpectedly. Ultimately she believed that the forces of "hoodoo," or malign conjure, were to blame:

> A man and he wife and I was workin' as woodchoppers on de Santa Fe route up Beaumont to Tyler County. After us git up and I starts "way, I . . . hear somethin" say, "Rose, you done somethin you ain't ought." I say, "No, Lawd, no." Den de voice say, "Somethin gwine happen to you," and de next mornin I's blind as de bat and I aint hever seed since . . . Some try tell me snow or sweat or smoke de reason. Dat aint de reason. Dey a old, old, slewfooted somethin' from Louisiana and dey say he de Conjure man, one dem old hoodoo niggers. He git mad at me de last plum-ripenin' time and he make up powdered rattlesnake dust and pass dat through my hair and I sho' ain't seed no more.[17]

16. Rossa Belle Cooley, *The Homes of the Freed* (New York, 1906), pp. 39–41, 55.

17. George Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 4, pt. 2 (Westport, Conn., 1972), p. 64.

Prominent as they were, supernatural interpretations of affliction did not apply only to illness and disease. Negative developments, unexpected losses, bad luck, adversity, and even death were also interpreted as having spiritual causes. Furthermore, underlying the spiritual causes of affliction were human intentions. Misfortune had meanings that emerged from the acts and thoughts of others. Conjure was a principal medium through which hostilities were articulated and characteristically "evil" emotions such as hatred, jealousy, fear, avarice, and lust were transformed into unseen spiritual agents—weapons—tangible, powerful forces that could be directed to attack others. Rather than openly displaying anger or bitterness one could assert one's hostility toward another by manipulating the spiritual realm.

Conjure and Interpersonal Relationships

Another face of the power of conjure was less negative: supernatural beliefs also functioned to arbitrate interpersonal and sexual relationships. In many cases of conjure, love was as powerful a force as hatred. Sometimes African American folk specialists were called upon to settle romantic disputes often conflicts or jealousies between wayward spouses or lovers. The Reverend Irving Lowery, a black Methodist minister born into slavery, described the ordeal of a female slave on a nineteenth-century South Carolina plantation, a victim in what he called a "love scrape." According to Lowery, after taking sick and suffering "a lingering illness of possibly four or six months' duration," the woman died. Her demise was attributed to malicious conjuring by a jealous rival.[18] Supernaturalism was also utilized within interpersonal relations as a means of enticement. Among slaves in the nineteenth century, folk recipes and spiritual prescriptions for matters of seduction were endless. In his narrative of southern plantation life in the 1800s, black abolitionist William Wells Brown observed that the conjurer Dinkie did a fair trade in providing consultations and charms for a clientele of lovelorn females.[19] Similarly, the fugitive slave Henry Bibb described a conjurer's talisman that promised to make any girl love him, "in spite of herself . . . no matter who she might be engaged to, nor whom she might be walking with." Though the charm ultimately failed to achieve the desired effect, Bibb was not deterred, for shortly thereafter he sought another specialist's assistance.[20] Many freed slaves recalled the power of the supernatural for attracting potential lovers. A report by Works Progress Administration interviewers in Oklahoma described a former slave from Tennessee who once bought a "sweetheart hand," or personal charm, from a "coal black" conjure man. In

18. Irving E. Lowery, *Life on the Old Plantation in Ante-bellum Days* (Columbia, S.C., 1911), pp. 84–85.

19. Brown, *My Southern Home*, p. 76.

20. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, written by himself* (New York, 1850), p. 30.

his farcical account of failed courtship, the ambitious suitor narrowly escaped the wrath of the girl's parents, who had accidently discovered his amorous intentions.[21]

In the area of love relationships, conjure seems to have provided immediate and effective consolation for women. In northwestern Florida in the early part of the twentieth century, anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston described a female "hoodoo doctor," Eulalia, who dealt solely with sexual entanglements. Apprenticing with Eulalia, Hurston recounted one such incident: "I went to study with Eulalia, who specialized in Man-and-woman cases. Everyday somebody came to get Eulalia to tie them up with some man or woman or to loose them from love . . . So one day a woman came to get tied to a man." According to Hurston, the distraught woman declared that a man she wanted could not marry her because his current wife had "got roots buried" and kept him under her power. She believed that their relationship would be undone if she could "work roots" of her own. She sought Eulalia's supernatural assistance to resolve the situation. Hurston described the conjure woman's reaction: 'Eulalia sat still and thought awhile. Then she said: 'Course Ah'm uh Christian woman and don't believe in partin' no husband and wife but since she done worked roots on him, to hold him where he don't want to be, it t'aint no sin for me to loose him.'" Hurston and her teacher devised a ritual that effectively banished the man's spouse, and nuptials between Eulalia's client and her partner were secured.[22] The prominence of conjure in meaningful life events suggests that it functioned as a symbolic marker mediating the anxieties that accompany social and emotional distress.

As part of its function within interpersonal relationships, conjure also had important protective uses for black women. Supernatural beliefs provided women who were powerless in their domestic situations with spiritual resources to address their circumstances. Interviews by Works Progress Administration writers with former slaves throughout the South yielded narratives of crisis, loss, and reconciliation which resonate strongly with oral testimonies from the black Christian tradition. In one account an African American woman explains that she sought the counsel of a conjurer after suffering abuse, abandonment, and infidelity at the hands of her husband. She believed that her husband's mistress, Minnie, was responsible for her misfortune. After her first meeting with the conjurer she stated that he had diagnosed her situation with skill and accuracy: "He got some cards and started tellin' me about Minnie. And 'fore my Maker I wouldn't tell

21. B. A. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945), pp. 31–33; see also Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, pp. 264–66, and Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 44 (Oct. 1931): 378.

22. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1978; reprint, Bloomington, Ind., 1935), pp. 197–99.

you a word of a story, he told me everything dat happened. At first I didn't believe in fortunetellers and root-workers, but after he told me so much that I knowed was true, I couldn't help but believe him." The conjurer offered the woman a charm to wear on her person, and in a short time she was reunited with her spouse. "I knows it done me all the good in the world . . . and right now whenever I see anybody sick or anybody tells me anything 'bout somebody hurtin' 'em, I send 'em to this same man and all of 'em say he really does what he says. I knows he's good and I ain't afraid to tell nobody 'bout him."[23]

Protecting oneself from violence, coping with afflictions, and healing broken relationships—these are the primary themes of many women's personal stories. The conjure stories also show the anguished struggles of African American women to repair unfortunate relationships with men. In another narrative, a black woman explained how she went to a root worker about restoring order to her household, which she believed a second female had disrupted. For her, the supernatural power of conjure came not a moment too soon. "When us went to [the conjurer] he told me if I hadn't come to see 'bout it, my husband never would have come back . . . He said too dat my husband wuz thinkin' 'bout gettin' a divorce pretty soon . . . Sho' nuff dat Sunday my husband come back like de man said. He cried and said he didn't know how come he had left me . . . and wanted me to forgive him dat time and he was sho' it wouldn't happen again."[24]

As a kind of spiritual therapy, the relationship of trust forged between conjurers and their clients helped to solidify the inner resources of black women during periods of crisis. Conjure beliefs provided the women with supernatural assets for strength and survival. For women who were sexually and emotionally abused, supernaturalism was a means of recovery and of spiritual and physical empowerment.

Conjure practices illuminated disputes of a diverse nature within African American communities. Incidents of malign supernaturalism were most often intraracial, with blacks injuring other blacks. Even after emancipation, the majority of spiritual practices seem to have been of a negative nature. White observers were quick to characterize malign supernaturalism among African Americans as demonstrating black inferiority. "Negroes are not necessarily loyal as a race," remarked Myrta Avary, a white southerner and critic of postwar race relations. "They fear each other, dread covert acts of vengeance, and being conjured."[25] Philip Bruce, an early southern historian, asserted that Virginia blacks had "no compunction about inflicting

23. Undated interview in Richmond City, Ga., folklore folder, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, pp. 1–7.

24. Ibid., pp. 1–6.

25. Myrta Lockett Avary, *Dixie After the War* (New York, 1906), p. 234.

injury" upon each other. He noted that as a rule African Americans were "always suspicious that their enemies have turned the black art against them in the same spirit that they themselves have sought to turn that art against their enemies."[26] Of course, these remarks must be viewed in their context, as reflecting the general hostility of many southern whites toward blacks during Reconstruction. Nevertheless, the picture they present—a world of animosity and discord—raises questions concerning the meaning of conjure for blacks in post–Civil War America.

Meanings of Conjure

Negative conjure seems to have been relatively common among African Americans during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. In many cases, resentment and revenge were the primary motives for supernatural affliction. Numerous accounts, both from the northern and southern states, attest to the various ways that conjure was used as tool for affliction, especially for women, who were often the most powerless within black communities. In rural Georgia after the turn of the century, ex-slave Mary Jackson told how one African American woman who "worked hard and got something for herself" became convinced that the entire community was resentful of her success and good fortune. When she was stricken with an illness, she believed that it had been put upon her by others who thought she was trying to be "more than anyone else."[27] Similar accounts are ubiquitous in black folk narrative. In one community, rivalry and avarice led one woman to conjure another so that she could corner a greater share of the neighborhood washing trade.[28] In another example of supernatural harming, a bitter woman was accused of supernaturally "fixing" her neighbor, her motive being that the other woman had been envious of the "nice clothes and dancing lessons" she had provided for her child.[29] Conjure-related conflicts could also reflect personal resentments involving the aesthetics of racial identity. An African American woman who disliked another individual's "light skin" and "straight hair" was held responsible for causing her affliction through conjure.[30] When a black woman living on the Georgia coast during the early decades of the twentieth century found herself sick, she explained to a white missionary that someone that she knew had "wished some evil" upon her because she was

26. Philip A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations on His Character, Condition and Prospects in Virginia* (New York, 1889), pp. 120–22.

27. Mary Jackson, undated interview, Georgia, folklore folder, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

28. Jeanette Robinson Murphy, "The Survival of African Music in America," in Jackson, *The Negro and His Folklore*, p. 335.

29. M. S. Lea, Two-Headed Doctors," *American Mercury*, Oct. 1927, p. 238.

30. Daniel Webster Davis, "Conjuration," *Southern Workman* 27 (1898): 251.

"so independent."[31] And in 1882, newspaper readers in the North learned of an unusual case that showed the extent to which faith in conjure could fuel an individual's drive for wealth and power: "The 'Philadelphia Press' . . . gives an account of the examination of a colored woman . . . [who] had rendered herself liable to indictment for fraud in professing to work charms by 'occult and crafty science'. The accusation was, that she had defrauded Charles Lecan, colored, out of one dollar, and had threatened to paralyze him if he did not give her more money in payment for services rendered in endeavoring to secure for him the presidency of the Reading Railroad by means of spells and incantations."[32]

It is clear from many accounts that suspicions of malign supernaturalism could fill members of black communities with distrust. Worry over malevolent conjure and people with hostile intentions was pervasive: one had to be constantly on the lookout for potentially dangerous enemies. Property and personal effects had to be guarded jealously; if they came into someone else's possession, one could fall under that person's control. Strange food could not be eaten for fear of ingesting dangerous objects. Dust from one's tracks, hair clippings, nail parings and objects of clothing could be used as ingredients in deadly charms. Katie Sutton, a former slave in Savannah, Georgia, took her suspicions to an extreme. "There are folks right here in this town that have the power to bewitch you," she claimed. Refusing to lend any of her personal goods to neighbors or friends, Sutton explained that some individuals were able to harm others supernaturally through borrowed items. "Evil spirits creeps around . . . and evil people's always able to hax [hex] you," she warned. Other black folk obsessively swept their tracks in order to cover their footprints, avoided having photographs taken, and pursued numerous countermeasures in order to divert the effects of malign supernaturalism.[33]

Each of these examples of conjuring involve women. They raise the question of how gender related to supernaturalism as a vehicle for harm. Were women more susceptible than men to the powers of conjure, either as clients or as victims?

Toward a History of Black Women and Supernaturalism

The religious world of African Americans during slavery and thereafter was a mosaic of conjuring and supernaturalism. It is a picture that enlarges our

31. Cooley, *Homes of The Freed*, pp. 40–41.

32. Stewart Culin, "Concerning Negro Sorcery in the United States," *Journal of American Folklore* 3 (1890): 284.

33. Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 6, pt. 2, pp. 193–94; Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Coastal Georgia Negroes* (Garden City, 1972), p. 2; Sarah Handy, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 48 (1891): 737.

understanding of the varieties and functions of spiritual power that were available to women and, to some extent, of gender relations and the formations of gender in black communities. As I view it, supernaturalism does not appear to be a predominant means of expressing gender controversies among slaves and their descendants; but gender did help to define the sorts of accusations that spiritual practices addressed—for example, spousal abandonment or marital infidelity. Like witchcraft allegations in many cultures, accusations of conjure followed the lines of fractured or damaged relationships, or emerged out of suspicions and rivalry due to economic, social, and sexual conflicts. For African Americans, conjure accusations emphasized "stress spots," where antagonisms over seemingly minor differences eventually erupted and bitterly divided members of a community.

Conjure complaints were leveled at co-workers, acquaintances, spouses, and family members. Community members were pitted against those who "stood out" in some way, either because they were successful or because they were disturbing or difficult. These supernatural beliefs had considerable utilitarian value for closely knit groups like plantation slaves or post–Civil War black communities, whose existence was constantly jeopardized by the threat of sale or separation and by racist intimidation. To take a functionalist perspective, then, conjure beliefs might have served to unite black communities against common enemies—anyone or anything that would threaten their insularity and cohesion.

The supernatural practices of African Americans also give us an alternative perspective on how women in particular used and experienced spiritual power for personal and pragmatic goals. Both men and women in African American communities were empowered by the supernatural, but it appears that black women's adoption of supernatural practices often had both a narrower emphasis and a wider implication. Like African American men, black women utilized spiritual resources for various ends, both private and public. Yet women had different needs from men, and supernaturalism served to address them. Women's concerns included protection, safety, and security within their interpersonal relationships. At times, their supernaturalism reflected their particular experiences as enslaved females within a rigidly oppressive social order or as women at risk in domestic situations. Yet it is unclear if black women were more attracted to supernaturalism by virtue of their dual subjugation or by the autonomy that conjure offered them. Although the activities of female conjurers are less conspicuous than those of males in the historical record, I suspect that women practitioners constituted a significant segment of those who were recognized within black communities as supernatural authorities.

Black folk traditions such as conjure have continued to hold a central location in African American life in the present day, and although class

differences, education, and ambivalence toward "superstitions" have obscured them, supernatural beliefs and practices are to be found among blacks in all social strata. A subtle transformation occurred, however, when the significance of conjure shifted in black folk religious discourse. Gradually, many supernatural beliefs became folklorized, which means that they became part of an ongoing body of tales and traditions circulating within African American oral culture. One of the consequences of the new emphasis on folklore was the transformation of conjurers from flesh-and-blood individuals into mythic figures. In many folklore traditions, supernatural practitioners were identified with witches and hags.[34] "A witch is a *cunjuh man* dat somebody paid tuh tawment yuh," explained Christine Nelson, a descendent of slaves in Georgia.[35] "Dey's sho' hoodoos," remarked an unidentified informant in Mississippi, elaborating on the relationship of witches and conjurers. "Mos gen'ally dey rides you in de shape uv a black cat, an' rides you in de daytime too, well ez de night."[36] In the late nineteenth century, folklorist Mary Owen noted that the black folk practitioners she met living on Missouri's border regions "invariably speak of themselves as Witches, men or women, or conjurers."[37] Witch and hag stories became standard fare in African American narrative in the nineteenth century, and, true to the nature of verbal improvisation, these tales

34. An African American mythic figure, the hag seems to have been a particularly fearsome being in southern folklore. Witches and hags in southern folk narrative were often identified with the female, but ex-slave Jacob Stroyer, writing of his experience as a bondsman in Charleston, South Carolina, noted that there were certain persons, "both men and women, who when they had grown old, were supposed to be witches." See Stroyer, *My Life in the South* (Salem, Mass., 1898), p. 52; Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, p. 147; also Cross, "Witchcraft in North Carolina," p. 226. For a reading of the purported practice of witch "riding" and its metaphorical sexual overtones, see William Grimes, *Narrative of the Life of William Grimes the Runaway Slave, written by himself* (New York, 1825), pp. 24–25; and Tom Peete Cross, "Folklore from the Southern States," *Journal of American Folklore* 22 (1909): 251.

35. Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, p. 17.

36. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, p. 151. For other witch-riding traditions, see *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina*, Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, vol. 7, Duke University (Chapel Hill, 1964), pp. 115–19.

37. Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York, 1860), p. 330; Cross, "Witchcraft in North Carolina"; Mary Owen, *Among the Voodoos*, Proceedings of the International Folklore Congress (London, 1892), p. 241; Mary Owen, *Voodoo Tales, As Told Among the Negroes of the Southwest* (New York, 1893), pp. 10–11. The problem of the gender of witches in black American folk traditions is not easily resolved. Folklorist Fanny Bergen argues that most older black women were conceived of as witches, but Elsie Clews Parsons makes note of a "witch-man" who was a powerful specialist in one southern black community. See Fanny Bergen, *Current Superstitions Collected from the Oral Traditions of English-Speaking Folk* (New York, 1896), p. 128, and Elsie Clews Parsons, "Folklore of the Sea Islands," *Memoirs of the American Folk-lore Society* 16 (Cambridge, Mass., 1923), p. 61. Puckett describes some witches as evil succubi who steal wives, which suggests a masculine identity, as does Cross, who notes that "a male witch sometimes causes his neighbor to leave his bed, and then, entering the house, enjoys his wife." See Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, p. 151; Cross, "Folklore," p. 251. While some accounts make reference to male witches, by far most witches in black folk narrative are female.

overlapped and merged with other folktales about spirits, ghosts, and other apparitions.[38]

The mythic transformation of the conjurer informed black perceptions of spiritual power as a gendered phenomenon. Supernatural tales made statements about women and the menace of potentially malign spirituality. Did the supernatural female figure signify danger, on some level, within African American culture and consciousness? More directly, did female conjurers, as actual persons, represent a threat to male spiritual authority? Evidence is sparse, but accounts indicate that some black women were chastised and punished by other members of the community for their use of the supernatural. In 1868, for example, a missionary on St. Helena Island described the battering of a black female by a family member in revenge for her "bewitching" a man.[39] In an earlier incident in South Carolina, a male slave was censured by the Welsh Neck Baptist Church for attacking an aged woman whom he was convinced had hexed him. In a separate case years later, former bondsman Jake McLeod recalled the hanging of an African American female slave who was accused of attempting to poison a white family. It was well known among other slaves, McLeod contended, that the woman practiced witchcraft.[40] Black women empowered by supernatural forces might have been seen as a threat to males' domination of sacred space, as well as an embodiment of the dangers of female spirituality, witchcraft, and maleficence within the larger society.

Unanswered questions remain in this exploration. In particular, the problem of the significance and tenacity of African American supernatural beliefs and traditions remains unexamined. What was the nature of relationship between supernaturalism and religion? Did conjure and Christianity overlap? Much of the evidence demonstrates that powerful, complex currents fed the spiritual beliefs of African Americans and that supernaturalism was indeed linked to religious belief. While there were strong objections to some of the ideas and assumptions of conjure, many blacks considered supernaturalism to be compatible with Christianity. A letter published in Hampton Institute's school newspaper in 1878 suggests that a relationship existed between Conjure and religious belief. A Hampton student had interviewed a local conjure woman, who declared that "she had a special revelation from God." The writer insisted that "all the conjure doctors [he] had ever heard of" had made similar claims.[41] Mary Owen

38. See, for example, Federal Writers Project, *South Carolina Folk Tales* (Columbia, S.C., 1941), and Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, 1984), pp. 150–53.

39. *American Freedman* 3 (June 1868): 430, cited in Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1977), p. 278.

40. Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 3, pt. 3, p. 157.

41. *Southern Workman* 24 (July 1895): 117; see also Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, p. 565 on the pious and reverential dispositions of Conjurers.

turned up similar evidence when she interviewed members of a "Voodoo" circle who met regularly at an African Methodist Episcopal church in northern Missouri. Among them was "Aunt Dorcas," who, like the other members, prepared charms, "jacks," and other objects that were endowed "with a familiar or attendant spirit in the name of the Lord."[42] For other blacks, Christianity and conjure combined as vital sources of healing power. Rossa Cooley, a white schoolteacher living in the South after the Civil War, explained how one local woman became desperately ill and, convinced she had been conjured, sought help from a "colored doctor" who prescribed medicine *and* prayer for relief from the affliction.[43] The overlap of Christianity and supernatural practices should not in itself be seen as unusual, given that throughout its history the church has manifested internal tensions between orthodoxy and popular notions of the efficacy of spiritual powers. The use of biblical sayings and prayers as ingredients in spells and charms, for example, is an occult tradition that dates far back to the origins of Christianity itself.[44]

While conventional religious accounts highlight the lives of African American male clergy or church elites, either they tend to overlook the roles of ordinary women or they obscure women's participation in non-institutionalized spiritual traditions. At present we lack a paradigm that places black women's spirituality within an appropriate historical context. The personal stories and accounts of black women and their dealings with the supernatural highlight the intersection of race and gender within African American religious experience. Black women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like their present-day counterparts, utilized prac-

42. Owen, *Among the Voodoos*, p. 232.

43. Cooley, *Homes of the Freed*, p. 41; "Charles Chesnutt, Superstition and Folklore of the South," *Modern Culture* 13 (1901), reprinted in Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (New York, 1981), p. 374.

44. Supernaturalism also appears in the African American Protestant tradition. For example, the manipulation of the natural world was acknowledged by two black nineteenth-century female preachers, Rebecca Jackson and Amanda Smith. Although they did not perceive themselves as practitioners of conjure, both women adopted similar principles (the appropriation of spiritual power, control of forces) within their ministries. Both Jackson and Smith claimed that their abilities to control the weather, curtail threatening human behavior, and engage other skills was evidence of sacred power. 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*, ed. Barbara Harris (Durham, 1984), pp. 136, 277; Jean Humez, ed., *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst, Mass., 1981), pp. 22–23; Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, The Colored Evangelist* (1893; reprint, Chicago, 1988), p. 158. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white Methodist preachers were also among those who tapped into popular supernaturalist beliefs by claiming possession of spiritual gifts and attributes. See Butler, *Awash*, pp. 236–41, and Donald Byrne, *No Foot of Land: Folklore of American Methodist Itinerants* (Metuchen, N.J., 1975), pp. 155–70.

tices and beliefs that effectively accommodated eclectic understandings of spirituality and supernaturalism. Such beliefs were available to all persons. Conjure was an example of a fully democratic and egalitarian system of spiritual empowerment that provided explanation and control for men and women who experienced disempowerment, regardless of gender roles and expectations. Still, although both African American men and women utilized the supernatural to resist oppression, it appears that conjure had more significant implications for women. Conjure functioned as a cultural index of the vital issues that affected African American women's lives in slavery and in freedom: their health, safety, sexual competition, protection, status, and fulfillment.

The experiences of black women provide a window into the many levels at which African American life has been suffused with supernaturalism. For many black people, supernatural beliefs endure even today. African American religion provided black people with the basis for enduring, culturally specific visions of the world and the universe. Conjure and supernaturalism offered a worldview that promised limitless powers and possibilities. A full history of black women's appropriation of these spiritual alternatives waits to be written.

CHAPTER 8

"It's a Spirit in Me": Spiritual Power and the Healing Work of African American Women in Slavery

SHARLA FETT

African American communities have historically defined health as a matter of the soul as well as the body. Spiritual power has therefore been central to effective healing for a wide range of black practitioners from conjure women to Holiness preachers.[1] Slave healers of the plantation South, in particular, embedded their medicinal practices in a context of sacred power. A formerly enslaved woman spoke to the spiritual significance of healing when she described how she had asked God to deliver her from the misery of her swollen limbs. She testified that "the spirit directed me to get some peach-tree leaves and beat them up and put them about my limbs. I did this, and in a day or two that swelling left me, and I haven't been bothered since. More than this, I don't remember ever paying out but three dollars for doctor's bills in my life either for myself, my children, or my grandchildren. Doctor Jesus tells me what to do."[2]

The appearance of this account within a longer conversion narrative accentuates the connections between faith and healing. Deliverance from illness through direct revelation from "the spirit" paralleled this woman's deliverance from sin. Just as conversion propelled her to tell others of her salvation, healing authorized her to cure others of their ailments. The experience of healing by "Doctor Jesus" thus served as a point of transformation both in the woman's faith and in her labors to keep her family

I wish to thank Jerma Jackson, Charles Joyner, Suzanne Lebsock, John Rogers, and Elizabeth Rose, who thoughtfully critiqued earlier versions of this chapter. A Dissertation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities made much of the writing possible.

1. Albert J. Raboteau, "The Afro-American Traditions," in *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Darrel W. Amundsen (New York, 1986), pp. 539–62. My title quotation comes from a conjure woman named Seven Sisters who is quoted in Carl Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (New York, 1934), p. 218. Oddly, the same quote is also attributed to a 1940 interview with a Virginia root woman named Melviny Brown in the WPA Folklore Collection (box 2, folder 2, item 264), Manuscripts Department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. The dual attribution of this quote illustrates the challenges of working with folklore sources as historical evidence.

2. Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 60.