

## Hoodoo: Black Magic or Healing Art?

A decrepit woman with crazy eyes sits in a dark room holding an old, sewn-up doll in one hand and a long, piercing needle in the other. She mumbles unintelligible words as she makes strange hand-gestures, and after a quick, dramatic pause, she lets out a wicked laugh as she drives the needle through the doll's heart.

Scenes like these, which are portrayed in movies and on television, have limited people's understanding of hoodoo to a practice that uses various forms of black magic to curse, hex, and haunt. This stereotype is a serious misrepresentation of hoodoo because, contrary to what the media leads viewers to believe, hoodoo is a spiritually-centered practice which relies on natural resources, such as herbs, to connect with the spiritual world so as to achieve balance in a person's life. In fact, a commonly neglected element of hoodoo is its connection to modern medicine which ties the practice to both mental and physical healing. According to authors Emilie Townes and Stephanie Mitchem, hoodoo arose in the southern parts of the United States in the early 1800s in areas heavily populated by black slaves, who "sought to manipulate invisible forces so as to influence the human condition..." (4). As Townes and Mitchem explain, "African Americans turned to their own doctors and healers for many health-related concerns, and even after emancipation, it was too expensive to seek professional medical care, so they relied on local [hoodoo] healers" (4, 5).

Those who have actually taken the time to study hoodoo tend to agree that it is a spiritual and nature-centered practice, with more benefits than mischief. Specifically, a major component of hoodoo is healing, which, as previously suggested, involves the use of natural remedies to cure various types of physical and mental conditions. Perhaps it is because of our society's reliance on doctor-prescribed drugs with unpronounceable names and mile-long lists of side-

effects, that it has become common today to dismiss the idea of natural healing. Nevertheless, hoodoo has an undeniable connection to the well-being of those who believe in it. Physicians have even confirmed that many of the natural remedies used in hoodoo serve as key ingredients in various medications. These connections include the use of natural remedies for healing, the placebo effect, and the *nocebo* effect, which Helen Pilcher refers to as the placebo effect's "evil twin" (30-33). These three elements play primary roles in mental health, which can ultimately affect a person's physical health.

Before exploring the healing power of hoodoo and its relationship to wellness, however, it is important to dispel the myths that have clouded the reality of hoodoo in order to demonstrate that the practice itself does not deserve the disparaging reputation the media has pieced together. To understand hoodoo as a whole, we must explore its religious, magical, spiritual, and natural components. Rather than relying on popular television shows to provide truthful, realistic, and unexaggerated information, people should look to reliable sources including researchers, authors, professors, and hoodoo practitioners, before forming an opinion on the widely misunderstood practice of hoodoo.

People's negative impression of hoodoo is primarily a result of misrepresentations that they see depicted in various types of media, including zombie movies and popular television shows such as *American Horror Story: Coven*, which portray hoodoo simply as a tool witches use to cast spells, curses, and hexes as a way to make the lives of their enemies as miserable as possible (commonly achieved by zombie-raising--a guaranteed crowd-pleaser). Anyone familiar with these types of popular television shows should agree that the media tends to overdramatize mysteries and to exaggerate the controversial aspects of a subject to engage its audience. Tactics like these have led to the reputation that many experts agree hoodoo does not deserve.

Unfortunately, as seems to be the case with spiritual beliefs or practices, although intended to promote well-being, individuals can manipulate them to cause harm. As a result, the negatives often seem to overshadow the positives, resulting in the labeling of an entire group of people based solely on the unscrupulous actions, or *acting*, for that matter, of a few people, whether the actions or the acting is real or depicted on television. This idea holds true for hoodoo, and, although the practice is intended to positively influence human life, its misuse by a small number of its practitioners, along with its melodramatic media portrayal, has tarnished its reputation, disregarding its significant connection to the natural aspects of modern medicine. While a minority appears to support the stereotypes, as noted earlier, those who have taken the time to study hoodoo take issue with hoodoo's stereotypical portrayal.

One aspect which seems to be universally agreed upon is hoodoo's reliance on magic as a central component. It is the *nature* of the magic, however, that is often misinterpreted. In her work *Hoodoo Heritage: A Brief History of American Folk Religion*, Megan Lane identifies hoodoo conjure, (the term used to refer to the folk-magic performed by practitioners) as "an intricate system of magic, herbalism, divination and witchcraft that [is] often erroneously dismissed as simple 'sorcery' and 'fortune telling'" (3). In other words, Lane believes the magic used in hoodoo is combined with spiritual beliefs, practices, and African-originated traditions. Lane agrees that America's misunderstanding of hoodoo, as is the case with many other African religious traditions, has been promoted by the media and pop-culture, especially through the American film industry, which most recently seems to be preoccupied with zombies (3). At the same time that I believe hoodoo's mysterious rituals may place it in a negative light, I also believe it is hoodoo's origins as an African slave tradition which contributes to its bad reputation due to a stale and in-grained prejudice toward people of color and, to some extent, the narrow-

minded belief that “black is bad.” As Lane argues, the media has taken advantage of people’s ignorance toward hoodoo. By portraying hoodoo solely as a malicious practice, the media has manipulated ignorance into fear, reinforcing the stereotypes that falsely define it today.

Lane criticizes the stereotypical, media-influenced version of hoodoo because it distorts the public’s vision and prevents society from seeing it for the traditional practice it is: one that is centralized in magic, spirituality, and naturalism. In his article “Hoodoo Possession in San Francisco: Notes on Therapeutic Aspects of Regression,” psychologist Renaldo J. Maduro launches the discussion more deeply into the spirituality of hoodoo, which Lane suggests is overridden by the media’s judgement-blurring misrepresentations. Maduro analyzes hoodoo’s roots, identifying it as a system of beliefs and a practice that has been inspired by the meshing of “African religions, animism, and Catholicism” (427). In fact, hoodoo’s deep connection to the Catholic religion is a key component. The Catholic influence is evident especially in rituals involving possession<sup>1</sup>. Maduro explains that in a possession, a spirit is believed to occupy the human body of the possessed person, allowing communication between the natural world and the spiritual world. When a possession takes place in hoodoo, it is believed that the host of the spirit is “receiving the Holy Ghost,” which, as a part of the Trinity, is a symbol of Catholicism. Maduro concludes that, contrary to its demonic connotation and negative perception in Catholicism, hoodoo practitioners actually regard possession as “an uplifting religious experience” (430).

Despite Maduro’s efforts to explain the connection of hoodoo to those who follow traditional, accepted religious beliefs and practices, Dr. Jeffrey E. Anderson offers a differing

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<sup>1</sup> Another word which tends to stir up fear (thanks to movies like *The Exorcist*).

opinion in his book, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure, A Handbook*, arguing that hoodoo lacks religious relevance. He contradicts both Lane and Maduro, asserting that hoodoo is merely “a body of magical beliefs, with little reference to deities and the trappings of religious worship” (xi). In fact, Anderson seems to promote the media’s stereotypes by insisting that hoodoo is simply a use of magic for the sake of casting spells, rather than a practice of religious traditions derived from the African- folk religion of Voodoo, earlier described by Lane. Anderson challenges hoodoo’s legitimacy and further denies any type of religious affiliation by claiming, as noted earlier, that “[hoodoo] practitioners generally limit their duties to telling fortunes, casting spells, and making charms for paying clients,” practices not typically associated with traditional religious practices (xi).

Seemingly in line with Maduro's thinking, author, professor, and lecturer Katrina Hazzard-Donald offers a more specific interpretation of the hoodoo practitioners' interests. In her book, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System*, she points out that some people still believe in hoodoo practitioners’ extraordinary magic-like abilities to harm; for example, their ability to cause a variety of conditions ranging from hair loss to paralysis, paranoia to financial disaster, and ugliness to blindness (136). Hazzard-Donald seems to characterize practitioners as having a more useful function, beyond Anderson’s characterization of them as spell-casters, charm-makers, and doll-probers. She insists that the practitioners’ roles have far more specific purposes. Hazzard-Donald acknowledges several types of hoodoo medicinal practitioners, and although their practices vary slightly, herbal treatment is central to all healers. Hazzard-Donald even characterizes hoodoo medical practitioners as “skilled herbalists, knowledgeable in both the identification of and use of plants and other natural substances, such as natural clay dirt and insect nests” (137). She adds that each type of healer specializes in a

particular area, much like physicians. Doctor-midwives, also known as medicine women, for example, specialize in herbal treatments focusing on the “matters of romance and of the heart” (137) while “treaters” (146) specialize in using “herbs, roots, prayers, rituals, amulets, and incantations to effect a positive change in a personal malady” (146). All herbal healers, however, establish their own remedies and “developed their regional pharmacopoeia,” or collection of medicinal drugs (136). Continuing with the positive aspects of hoodoo, Hazzard-Donald presents another method used in hoodoo medicine, this one involving various types of string used to tie “sacred healing knots” (147). Depending on the number of knots tied, and the location of the string, the procedure could be used to treat various symptoms and, overall, is considered “a powerful protective device” (147).

While Hazzard-Donald highlights the healing aspect of hoodoo, Lane points out that these natural aspects of hoodoo, although typically used to heal, can also be used to harm. Lane acknowledges the natural and spiritual worlds as key elements in hoodoo, but advises that they *do not* determine the positive or negative outcome of the magic. The key to understanding this concept, Lane suggests, is the understanding that “spiritual energy is seen as neutral; the ways in which conjure [is] manifested is wholly dependent upon the nature and personality of the practitioner” (4). Thus, Lane insists, hoodoo is not intrinsically good or bad; instead, it is highly situational and dependent on the practitioner’s benevolent or malevolent intentions, rather than the practice itself.

Those who agree with Lane tend to view and respect hoodoo as they would any other belief system or religion and contend that any practice used with bad intentions has the capability of producing negative results. Hoodoo magic, however, as suggested, is more commonly used to improve the quality of life. One supporter of this idea is modern-day practitioner and University

of Memphis professor, Arthur Flowers, who distinguishes between folk magic and high magic, which he believes hoodoo has adopted. In an interview (with Reginald Martin), Flowers clarifies that he is not focused on the traditional idea of folk magic, but prefers to center his attention on what he calls “high magic.” Flowers uses high magic to define hoodoo’s role in modern-day culture. Like most other practitioners, he also reinforces the idea that hoodoo is not the frightening, harmful practice the media has made it out to be. Flowers insists that high magic, the driving force of hoodoo, “is about transforming reality, about shaping generations, [and] about [enhancing]... the human condition” (4). The social significance of hoodoo is key to Flowers, and high magic, he concludes, is what “makes the world go round” (4).

Considering the discussion among students of hoodoo, it seems that hoodoo is open to interpretation depending on how the practitioner chooses to utilize it. What does seem clear is hoodoo’s role in both spiritual and physical healing as an underrated component of this practice, and it typically receives little attention for its medicinal elements. Because of this oversight, the idea of natural healing might not sound viable to some people. There have been several accounts, however, of people being both physically and mentally affected by hoodoo practitioners’ uses of natural resources. There appears to be an undeniable connection between hoodoo and wellness, but the various ways in which the two are related warrant further examination.

Although some may reject the idea of using natural remedies to cure illness, there are medical professionals who have confirmed that some modern-day medications are actually derived from natural remedies, such as those used by hoodoo healers. Dr. Steven Ehrlich, of the University of Maryland Medical Center, claims that ginger, a root commonly used in hoodoo healing,

help[s] prevent or treat nausea and vomiting from motion sickness, pregnancy, and cancer chemotherapy. It is also used to treat mild stomach upset, to reduce pain of osteoarthritis, and may even be used in heart disease... [by lowering] cholesterol and [helping to] prevent blood from clotting.

It seems as though society doubts the effectiveness of natural remedies because they are not in pill-form, however, Family Practice physician Dr. Jason Pizzola confirms that many of these natural remedies serve as key ingredients in today's common medicines. "We take the bark of a willow tree and chew on it, and it will relieve pain." He elaborates, "you take the bark of a willow tree and you add some sugar, and you've got two of the main components of aspirin, a substance used to treat pain and clot formation." Dr. Pizzola identifies the concept of natural remedies as simply "a less precise form of what we do in modern medicine." He explains, "We are very precise about the amount of the substance that we use. If you take a Bayer aspirin, you are getting 325 mg of salicylic acid, but if you're chewing on the bark from a willow tree, we don't know how many milligrams that is." Medicine began with the use of natural resources, and for that reason, they serve as a basis for a significant portion of pharmaceuticals. It seems that some aspects of modern medicine are surprisingly similar to the forms of natural healing used in hoodoo, and although hoodoo practitioners may not be as precise with their measurements as today's physicians and pharmaceutical companies, the difference between hoodoo healers and health care physicians may be that "hoodoo healers are not performing their form of medicine in a white coat" (Pizzola).

Although hoodoo doctors use natural remedies to cure physical complications, hoodoo healing is not limited to the physical alone. The mind also plays a significant role in a person's well-being. Although the familiar phrase "Mind over matter" may seem like a meaningless



cliché, its message holds truth. One's physical health, in many cases, is dependent on mental health. This belief seems to play a prominent role in hoodoo's relationship to wellness. One example of the relationship between mental and physical wellness is evident in the placebo effect, the idea that "the power of suggestion can improve health" (Pilcher 30-33). When hoodoo believers seek the help of a practitioner, they do so because they value their "provider's" insight in the same way believers in Western medicine value the insight of medical doctors. If we visit the doctor because we feel sick and the doctor prescribes a particular medication, telling us that it will make us feel better, our trust in our doctor is such that we *believe* the prescription will make us feel better, and as a result, it *does* make us feel better. Of course, the actual medication does play a role, but so does the patient's willingness to accept the physician's word. A similar relationship exists between hoodoo believers and *their* doctors. If they are told by their practitioner that a particular natural remedy or a spiritual healing method will heal them, their faith in their doctor's word causes, or at least contributes to, their feeling better. Medical doctors have been able to support the legitimacy of the placebo effect by actually prescribing placebos (pills which contain no medicines) to their patients who believe that they are taking a medication that is improving their condition. Even though the placebo is not physically doing anything for them, their improvement supports the idea of "mind over matter." The patients seem to actually physically heal themselves simply by believing that the placebo is making them feel better (Pilcher 30-33).

Conversely, writer Helen Pilcher points out in her article: "The New Witch Doctors: How Belief Can Kill" that "the placebo effect has an evil twin: the nocebo effect, in which... negative expectations can produce harmful effects" (30-33). The nocebo effect shares the same characteristics with the placebo effect, but rather than improving well-being, this effect worsens

it. Continuing with the same example, if a medical doctor were to tell a patient that he or she had a terminal illness, even if the patient had no symptoms and felt fine, the patient, according to the nocebo effect, would likely be overcome with panic and start to feel sick because of what the doctor had told the patient. Clifton Meador, a physician at the Vanderbilt School of Medicine in Nashville, Tennessee, recalls an account of a man named Sam Shoeman who was condemned by the nocebo effect. This man was diagnosed with end-stage liver cancer, and after his doctor's prognosis of only a few months, he died in the timeframe his doctor estimated he would. After an autopsy of Shoeman, however, it was discovered that his doctor had misdiagnosed him, and the "end-stage liver cancer" he was suffering from was only a tiny tumor that was not malignant (Pilcher 30-33). Dr. Meador explains that Showman "didn't die from cancer, but from believing he was dying of cancer. If everyone treats you as if you are dying, you buy into it" (qtd. in Pilcher (30-33)). Meador concludes that when you convince yourself you are dying, "everything in your whole being becomes about dying" (qtd. in Pilcher 30-33). Hoodoo practitioners share this same influence over their patients. If told they have been placed under a curse that will slowly kill them, the patients convince themselves they are going to die, and once they begin to focus on this anticipated outcome, the mind's influence over the body is so powerful, that it slowly becomes a reality.

Hoodoo's ties to modern medicine and wellness are components that should serve as a reminder that hoodoo is not as foreign or dark a practice as society has been led to believe. Hoodoo healers may prescribe their medicine differently than our doctors do, and they may have different rationale for the causes of various illnesses, but the central idea is that they, like physicians, care about the well-being of their patients. As demonstrated through people's tendency to belittle hoodoo and its use of natural remedies, for some reason our society tends to

trust substances that are artificially manufactured, packaged, and sold on a shelf over the simple, organic ones we are able to grow naturally in our gardens. It is instinctive to be skeptical about the substances we are putting into our bodies to treat common illnesses such as sore throats, headaches, and upset stomachs, but doesn't honey with lemon, lavender oil, and mint tea sound a lot more reassuring than Chlorpheniramine-DM-Acetaminophen, Nabumetone, and Bismuth Subsalicylate?

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