

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

---

University Libraries Faculty & Staff Book Gallery University Libraries Faculty & Staff Book Gallery

---

2008

## American Shamans: Journeys with Traditional Healers

Jack G. Montgomery Jr.

*Western Kentucky University*, [jack.montgomery@wku.edu](mailto:jack.montgomery@wku.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlts\\_book](https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlts_book)



Part of the [Folklore Commons](#), [Other Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jack Montgomery (2008) American Shamans: Journeys with Traditional Healers. Hector, NY: Busca Inc.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Faculty & Staff Book Gallery by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

# Chapter One: Beneath the Spanish Moss: The World of the Root Doctor

*History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.*

**Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)**

*The thing always happens that you really believe in; and the belief in a thing makes it happen.*

**Frank Lloyd Wright, architect (1869-1959)**

For many of us growing up in the 1960s rural South, the world of ghosts, witches and magic was never far away. Grandparents and parents often told hair-raising stories of mysterious happenings and eerie events as a form of entertainment, as children sat entranced in wide-eyed amazement. The idea of a ghost or witch out there in the dark filled many a night with excitement and wonder. In many homes, the sense of the presence of a beloved, deceased family member was often noted with comfort and the reassurance that we would someday “meet on that golden shore.”

In this era, before the Internet and television’s mindless absorption of our free time, we often felt we could sense that which was unseen, and provided we didn’t make too much of a fuss about it, we were free to believe in the miraculous without fear of rebuke or censure.

When we became ill, home remedies and therapies were employed first to treat many types of sickness, and prayers were an integral part of the healing process. Doctors were expensive and were consulted only when traditional healing methods were not effective.

Sometimes, parents adhered more to modern ideas and dismissed the old traditional remedies—both herbal and spiritual—as superstition. As is not uncommon in close-knit, extended families, children often had a special rapport and respect for their grandparents. We learned not to be too quick in dismissing traditional beliefs or to ignore things seen just out of the range of normal sight. Perhaps as a result of this close connection with the older generation, as children, we were more open to the miraculous and spiritual in nature, although such sensitivities also seemed to run in certain families.

For example, I can remember as a teenager watching a friend's mother scrying into a large brass bowl to gain knowledge of geographically distant events. We were always respectful of our elders, no matter how eccentric, and we would assume there were many things in this world beyond our understanding. For us, this other spiritual world existed in addition to and often as a compliment to a clearly defined tradition of attending church on Sunday. One was the public expression of faith and the other a more private one. As a result, old beliefs were internalized and retained as an intimate part of our personalities.

### **A Child's Personal Look Back: Society and Race in the Rural South**

Contrary to the popular picture painted by the national media of white and black race relations in the South during the late 1950s and 1960s, in many areas, while living separate public lives, many blacks and whites privately regarded each other with acceptance and respect.

Children of both races were taught to respect adults, regardless of their color. I cannot imagine what would have happened to me had my folks discovered I had participated in some sort of racially motivated incident. Such things were "just not done by decent Christian people," as my mother would say. Racism, while socially tolerated, was also considered by many whites an offense against the God that made us all. This sort of racism was a Catch-22 situation, and actually repressive to everyone involved in the culture. Few Southern whites felt they could risk challenging the prevailing social mores, so there developed an odd paradigm of public and private socially mixed messages.

At the time, many churches would refuse to seat an African American during a service, yet the children's Sunday school would be singing "Jesus Loves the Little Children" with the words "Red, and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world." This odd, disjointed social paradigm was also a part of our everyday lives.

In reality, in the 1950s and 1960s and even today, the private undercurrent and public expression of racism probably has as much to do with social positioning as actual race. Someone had to occupy the bottom rung of society, given the similar histories of exploitation and manipulation of the poor whites and African Americans in the South. The dominant socioeconomic class had long understood that they could control both groups by effectively pitting one against the other

along racial lines. It worked effectively during Reconstruction and it still functions today with the same sad results for both groups.

I would never attempt to paint a sentimental or beneficent picture of the social situation that existed in the 1960s South. On a personal level, however, it was during those times that some barriers began to crumble.

Here is an example from my own childhood. My mother, who was a career woman in a managerial position in the 1950s, which was unusual for that time and place, fell ill. Her condition required surgery, and during her recovery, she hired an African American woman to help her with the housekeeping. In those days, it was the custom that the paid help would take their meals and breaks on the back porch, and not with the family. My mother, however, thought otherwise. "If she is good enough to work in my home, she's good enough to sit and eat with us at my table!" she replied, as some neighbors raised objections to the violation of this established social protocol.

After this incident, my mother was shunned by those neighbors. Yet, more than forty years later, she and her African American housekeeper have maintained their friendship and still visit and talk to this day.

Was this situation atypical? I do not know, but I suspect that for every act of bigotry and intolerance during that time, there was possibly a private one of kindness and respect. I also suspect that these expressions were more common among women than men.

Women, both black and white, shared the common bond of gender-based restrictions, which carried the real impact of economic and social repression. The difference was in the degree to which it was expressed. I am not making excuses for the terrible system of racial segregation that debased and confined both cultures. It was a cultural system that desperately needed to change then and must continue to evolve. I am not attempting to excuse or fully explain this complex situation. I am offering a bit of personal perspective, based on my own observations as a boy growing up in Columbia, South Carolina, during this period.

One must also remember that unlike the ghettos of the urban north, many blacks and whites in the South often lived in close physical proximity to each other. In the early 1960s, as segregation

was lifted in the public schools, as often as not, the social barriers propagated by adult fears, ingrained bigotry and simple ignorance broke down within the innocence of childhood. Friendships developed out of the wonderful activity of play. It was often through this play that the white kids learned the stories and lore around the legendary figures known as the root doctor or conjure man or conjure woman.

### **First Glimpses of the Root Doctor or Hoodoo Culture:**

In 1965, my family moved to a suburb near Irmo, South Carolina, which was fifteen miles northwest of the capitol city of Columbia. At that time, the area was still distinctly rural. It was there that I first heard the word “root doctor.” As boys engaged in our endless games we would often here someone exclaim “I’m going to put the root on you!” or “I’m going to see the root doctor and he’ll fix you!” These idle taunts belayed a powerful social presence that few of us understood. We suspected there was a reality that existed behind the everyday one of school, church and play. We heard stories of these powerful beings who could curse and heal, transverse the worlds of the living and the dead and were to be afforded the greatest respect and deference.

Historically, the traditions of the conjure man, conjure woman or root doctor came over with the Africans as they were brought to colonial America as slaves. Among these Africans were their tribal healers or shamans. The names that subsequently developed for their shamanic practice included root working, conjure, witch doctoring, tricking and Hoodoo.

Modern occult authority Catherine Yronwode defines the commonly used term Hoodoo on the extensive Lucky Mojo website. In the section called “Hoodoo in Theory and Practice,” she writes in the article “Hoodoo: African American Magic,” that Hoodoo is “an American term, originating in the nineteenth century or earlier for African American folk magic” (Yronwode 1). Yronwode continues,

Hoodoo consists of a large body of African folkloric practices and beliefs with a considerable admixture of American Indian botanical knowledge and European folklore. Although most of its adherents are black, contrary to popular opinion, it has always been practiced by both whites and blacks in America. (“Magic” 1)

She goes on to describe the variations applied to the word Hoodoo:

Hoodoo is used as a noun to name both the system of magic (“He used hoodoo on her”) and its practitioners (“Doctor Buzzard was a great hoodoo in his day”). In the 1930s, some practitioners used the noun “hoodooism” (analogous with “occultism”) to describe their work, but that term has dropped out of common parlance. Hoodoo is also an adjective (“he layed a hoodoo trick for her”) and a verb (“she hoodooed that man until he couldn’t love no one but her”). (Yronwode, “Magic” par. 2)

The word Hoodoo permeated the language and culture of the rural South; it has appeared in the lyrics of hundreds of traditional blues and folk songs dating back to the early 19th century.

As to the source of the term “root”—as in a charm or a person known as a root doctor—it is also rooted in history with multiple definitions. Strictly speaking, the actual term “root” refers to a man-made object created by the root doctor that contains herbs, symbols and other objects needed to affect the spell. The roots I have seen in my own fieldwork have been in bottles, sewn in packets of cloth or tied together in a bundle. Most have been “charged” with something to activate them. In her book, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, historian Yvonne Chireau says, “Root work characterized the style of utilizing certain natural objects in the performance of ritual” (277). In *Herbal and Magical Medicine: Traditional Healing Today*, researcher Holly Matthews says root in regard to this magical system is “because plant roots are an important component of magical spells that are used to cause illnesses and of the remedies used to cure them” (69). In many parts of the Carolinas and Georgia, the terms Hoodoo and root work are used interchangeably, as they are in this book.

### **The Seeds of Hoodoo Culture**

Faith Mitchell cites three factors leading to the development of the distinct African American culture found in the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia, in her book *Hoodoo Medicine: Gullah Herbal Remedies*. These three factors are the large proportion of black slaves imported to South Carolina, the geographic and social isolation in which the slaves often found themselves after the end of the Civil War, and laws that allowed for the direct importation of slaves from the African subcontinent to that coastal region commonly known as the Low Country.

As Robert Olwell notes in *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South*

*Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790*, the term Low Country is generally used to refer to an area that “extends along South Carolina’s Atlantic shore for approximately two hundred miles and inland for fifty miles or so” (10).

South Carolina was originally settled from existing British colonies in Barbados. The Low Country did not provide the new settlers with a land like home or the Caribbean. The settlers found wide coastal plains, swamps infested with snakes and mosquitoes, and hurricanes that would sweep in without warning and devastate everything in their path. This was not an easy place to secure politically or in which to prosper without a significant labor pool. The importation of slaves directly from Africa and the Caribbean provided that labor, and in doing so, forever changed the culture and history of the colony.

A relatively unknown aspect of this period was that in the early days of the colonies, many de facto slaves were gleaned from the poorer classes of the British Isles, which was already an also common practice in the British colonies of the Caribbean. The terms often used for this forced importation of human beings was called transportation and indentured servitude, which to the casual reader sounds like a form of labor exchange for the payment of passage to the colonies or a just sentence for some moral infraction. In the *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery*, Robert McColley notes, “Englishmen, in the early seventeenth century, used the word *servant* when they meant *slave* in our sense, and, indeed, white Southerners invariably used *servant* until 1865 and beyond” (781).

The modern American must remember that the aristocratic citizens of the American colonies carried with them the perceptions and prejudices of English society towards those in poverty, non-Christians, foreigners and non-Caucasians. Personal wealth and social success was seen as resulting from Divine favor and hence, those without it deserved their wretched fate and more.

According to Stephen Talty’s 2000 article “Spooked: The White Slave Narratives,” published in *Transition*, this was not a period of great compassion for the suffering of others. Most citizens at least partially agreed with Virginia Tidewater planter and philosopher of slavery, George Fitzhugh, when he said, “Some are born with saddles on their backs and the riding does them good” (Talty 69-70). This rationalization led the wealthy planters to believe the poor were actually uplifted by their servitude. This attitude toward the lower classes survived well into the

20th century. I can clearly remember during the period of the Civil Rights movement hearing unselfconscious comments like “but we were good to our Negroes, we looked after them, they’re like children, you know” and “Poor things, nothing but white trash. They just can’t help themselves.”

In many cases, the poor of the British Isles often sold themselves to a sea captain or company to avoid debtor’s prison. Working class people could be arrested and classified as criminals for an incredibly wide variety of petty offenses, including not attending church, being unemployed, not being able to pay their debts, being a member of the losing side in a rebellion or a political rival to the government. Many were also kidnapped, including thousands of children, and shipped to the colonies under horrific conditions where, if they survived, they were sold into a life of frequent brutality and hard labor until they ran away or died. This indenturing, transportation and eventual sale of thousands of individuals and, in many cases, their entire families, became an economically lucrative business that thrived throughout the colonial period. The wealthy planter society that personally despised and exploited these people had financially supported this system until it became clear, as with the Caribbean slave experience, that enslaved whites proved physically unsuited for the semi-tropical climate of the Low Country and easily succumbed to disease and hardship. Native Americans likewise proved difficult to manage and, like their white counterparts, could slip away and blend into the social fabric of the colony. The African slave was physically suited to the environment and could be more easily identified should he or she try to escape. Later in the colonial period, after two violent social backlashes by the poor class of whites against their treatment by the landed aristocracy, the planter society conceded some social status to the poor white in return for social and racial loyalty. According to Olwell, it is considered by some that they

...were often suspected of having too much familiarity with the slaves, they also filled the ranks of the town watch, the parish slave patrol and found employment as overseers on the large estates. (45)

Many also became tenant farmers and most never realized the promise of true freedom and opportunity of the new world.

### **The Impact of the Africans**



According to the 2004 PBS television series, “Africans in America: The Terrible Transformation, Part 1: 1450-1750,” in the early days of the colonies:

Many Africans and poor whites — most of the laborers came from the English working class — stood on the same ground. Black and white women worked side-by-side in the fields. Black and white men who broke their servant contract were equally punished. (“Indentured” 1)

All were indentured servants. During their time as servants, they were fed and housed. Afterwards, they would be given what were known as “freedom dues,” which usually included a piece of land and supplies, including a gun. Black-skinned or white-skinned, they became free. (“Indentured” 1)

An insidious, racist ideology began to develop that was applied specifically to the African Americans, while a similar, but class-oriented ideology developed toward the poor whites. Both groups were seen as social inferiors and therefore deserving of scorn and exploitation. The particular racial ideology applied to African Americans sought to secure and insure social dominance based on ideas of inherent biological and mental inferiority and often characterized both slaves and former slaves as less than completely human. Even religious texts were employed as a rationalization for the continued subjugation and mistreatment of an entire race of people. Social groups who wish to dominate a race, ethnic group or gender throughout history, have used religion and later pseudo-science to justify their cruelty and maintain their social status. As far back as the Old Testament, we find many written accounts of those societies whom the Israelites conquered demonized as corrupt, evil and deserving of conquest and destruction. Some elements of human behavior seem constant throughout the ages.

Historian David Blight says in “Africans in America”:

[the] disorder that the indentured servant system had created made racial slavery to southern slaveholders much more attractive, because what were black slaves now? Well, they were a permanent dependent labor force, which could be defined as a people set apart. They were racially set apart. They were outsiders. They were strangers and in many ways throughout the world, slavery has taken root, especially where people are considered outsiders and can be put in a permanent status of slavery. (“Indentured” 3)

The impact of the presence of African American culture on life in the South Carolina and Georgia Low Country is impossible to understate. In the online article “Understanding Slavery: The Lives of Eighteenth Century African-Americans,” found on the South Carolina Information Highway website, published by the Chicora Foundation, it is noted that

...the history of South Carolina is inexorably intertwined with slavery. Everything on the plantation –the roads, the buildings, the fences, the gardens and the crops – was the result of African American sweat and blood. There likely would be no South Carolina history were it not for the labors of the African Americans brought to these shores in slave ships. (1)

The predominant crops grown in the developing plantation system in coastal South Carolina were rice, indigo and livestock, which required experience and specialized skills. Faith Mitchell points out that many slaves “may have had prior experience tending herds” (16) and were familiar with the cultivation of rice in Africa, making these particular people very valuable to the growing agricultural environment. Most of the slaves imported to the South Carolina coast and Georgia through the ports of Charleston and Savannah were from the west coast of Africa from countries now known as Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria.

### **Culture by Sheer Force of Numbers**

The importance the role of the slave population in South Carolina’s cultural history is hard to underestimate, according to “The Lives of African-American Slaves in Carolina During the 18th Century”:

South Carolina had a clear black majority from about 1708 through most of the eighteenth century. By 1720 there were about 18,000 people living in South Carolina and 65% of these were enslaved African Americans. In St. James Goose Creek, a parish just north of Charles Towne, there were only 535 whites and 2,027 black slaves. (1)

This numerical imbalance in population led to a near constant fear of slave revolts among whites and a brutally repressive society for the slave. Curiously, this fear also brought an odd blending of African and Anglo cultures while maintaining a severe imbalance of social and political power. As Frank Tannenbaum noted in *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas*,

“Nothing escaped the influence of slaves and slavery, nothing and no one” (117). Various patterns of speech and habits, such as cooking and attitudes, were exchanged between whites and blacks, yet they lived socially worlds apart with many different gradations and strata within their societies. There were also many people in a sort of social limbo due to their mixed racial heritage that was, while officially frowned upon, quietly tolerated.

Many slaves initially resisted attempts to Christianize them and in the Southeast, there existed no legal or cultural desire by the white population to do so. Carolyn Morrow Long reminds us in *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, that “English Common Law, unlike the Black Codes of the Catholic Slave trading countries of France, Spain, and Portugal, did not acknowledge the rights of slaves as human beings; they were viewed strictly as property” (72).

Several authors have indicated that slaveholders feared that the slave’s conversion to was viewed with suspicion as a possible step toward some level of equality and legal status. Long indicates that only after several slave revolts during the colonial period were the slave owners finally “persuaded that Christianization would make the slaves more docile” (73).

It was within this cultural and social confusion that traditional African practices were adapted to their new environment and, in turn, inserted themselves into the new plantation slave culture. This process preserved elements of the African heritage while becoming a cultural hybrid. It was this largely invisible cultural system that included Hoodoo.

### **Hoodoo as a Cultural System Distinct from Voodoo**

In her exploration of the hoodoo tradition, Catherine Yronwode defines this magical system as one different from the Voodoo-based slave society of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. In the section “What Hoodoo Is,” on the webpage “Hoodoo: African American Magic,” Yronwode says Hoodoo:

...places emphasis on personal magical power and thus it lacks strong links to any specific form of theology and can be adapted to any one of several forms of outward religious worship. Although an individual practitioner may take on students, Hoodoo is structured along an obvious hierarchical system. Teachings and rituals are handed down from a one practitioner to another, but there are no priests or priestesses and no division between initiates and laity (par. 2)

Another aspect of this cultural hybrid is the difference between the magical medical practices of the slave culture of South Carolina and Georgia and the one that developed in New Orleans.

The Voodoo culture of New Orleans survives today beyond the garish shows produced for the tourist. Voodoo rituals blend at least two distinct religions and cultures: African native religions and Roman Catholicism, as practiced in the delta region of Louisiana. Voodoo practices invoke many gods and goddesses from African native religions, as well as calling on the power of Catholic saints in its magical practices.

The Hoodoo practice of root doctoring or conjure employs no specific gods or goddesses. This may be due to the predominance of Protestant-based Christianity in the Carolinas and Georgia, which teaches, according to James Kirkland in *Herbal and Magical Medicine: Traditional Healing Today*, that

...the individual lives in a hostile world where the forces of God are pitted against the forces of the devil in a daily struggle for control. Illness and misfortune are likely to result whenever the individual fails to maintain a balance between these competing forces, whether natural or magical. (71-72)

Hoodoo and Root doctoring as a system does acknowledge the presence of spirits and a spirit world, but it is more akin to the traditional African belief in animism.

It must be stated at this point that root doctoring or Hoodoo is also a distinct tradition from Haitian Voodoo and Santeria in the same way it differs from New Orleans Voodoo: the syncretic blend of traditions varies within each practice, based on culture, language, customs, and evolved religious practices. Hoodoo did, however, adopt ideas and practices from other cultures, including Esoteric German Christianity and the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah. This adoption occurred as a result of commerce when magical treatises like “The Black Pullet,” “The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses,” and the so-called “spurious” magical writings of Albertus Magnus were typically offered through the catalogs of Jewish-owned curio companies like King Novelty and Clover Horn, according to Yronwode (“Admixtures” 11). For example, Low Country root doctors began to use psalms from the Christian Bible as chants and incantations from a book called *Secrets of the Psalms*, a cheaply made paperback of dubious authorship and origin based very loosely on the use of the psalms in the Kabbalah.

There have been quite a few inexpensively produced compilations of spells sold by such curio shops as mentioned above. As many of the spells, formulas and ritual practices contained in these titles were adopted and contributed to the development of root and Hoodoo practices, a mention of a few historic titles is appropriate to the discussion of resources available to the interested or would-be practitioner.

Several of these small magical texts have circulated for more than a century in Powwow and Hoodoo circles as spell-books. John George Hohman's *The Long Lost Friend*, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, and *Albertus Magnus* are the most well known. They provided recipes for potions and plasters, along with spells for all manner of purposes from colic in horses, spellbinding thieves, curing snakebite and banishment of evil spirits. Many of these books were compilations of charms and spells from many, often questionable, sources but as they met a need, they were widely accepted and distributed.

In 1974, I found a mail order reprint copy of Hohman's *Powwows; or The Long Lost Friend: A Collection of Mysterious and Invaluable Arts and Remedies for Man as Well as Animals*. Several years ago, I bought another copy from Amazon.com as my older one was falling apart. Hohman, at least, was an early compiler of the folk remedies he knew from his native land and from his new-found home. According to what is known of him, Hohman traveled extensively in the early 19th century German and Swiss communities peddling his book of remedies with modest success. After his death, *The Long Lost Friend* was reproduced throughout the 19th century by small local presses in limited production runs. In this century, it has been sold as a cheap reprint by so-called novelty houses, whose merchandise also included lotions, potions, charms, religious talismans, etc., for the rural and newly urbanized Appalachian, German and African American communities. This is a remarkable publishing record for a rather unremarkable booklet. It stands as testament to the enduring quality of the private culture of family traditions.

Although we have seen some similarities in books and materials used in various traditions, the ritual differences are significant. Another difference between the Hoodoo and Voodoo traditions is found in their respective ritual behaviors. In New Orleans Voodoo, rituals were often semi-public events involving numerous people with specific tasks to perform in order for the event to be successful. In many cases, drums, dancing and chants were employed around a permanent or

semi-permanent altar. The rituals were led by a group of special dedicants or a single priest or priestess. As the worship service progressed, members of the ritual team would enter trance and become possessed by the Gods or spirits summoned for the ritual. In this state of trance, they would convey blessings, information or simply adopt and emulate the known behaviors of the Gods.

In Hoodoo, formal group rituals of any sort were a rare exception. Most root doctors understood that the group rituals were being performed in and by the local Christian church. The magical, ritual practices therefore were often conducted in private by one individual or with one assistant. The act of formal religious worship simply was not a part of the practice.

### **The Golden Age of the Root Doctor**

After the Civil War, much of the land that comprised the old plantations and many small farms existed for decades in a state of cultural isolation. These small, isolated areas suffered from a form of state and local governmental indifference and neglect that lasted well into the 20th century. Many African Americans in the Low Country or on the coastal islands lived without significant contact with the greater American culture or even regional societies. Faith Mitchell, in *Hoodoo Medicine*, says, "...in the 1930s, the first bridges connecting the Sea Islands to the mainland were built" (17). This isolation factor was especially true for the Gullah culture of the Sea Islands, just off the coast near Beaufort and Savannah. Gullah culture was essentially ignored by the white world after the Civil War; hence, it grew and retained many elements of its African roots in its dialect, music, spirituality, arts and customs. During the 1920s, according to leading anthropologist Melville Herskovits, in William Pollitzer's *The Gullah People and their African Heritage*, the Gullah culture was "very African" (12). In such social isolation, many of these people reached into their collective memory and sought guidance through their heritage. Out of that heritage emerged people who became adept in healing, interpreting the environment and dealing with the unknown—as they perceived it—which included the belief in the world of spirits and magic.

During the period of slavery, each plantation or community had a shaman who addressed these spiritual issues and provided the necessary magical services. These individuals, like their African counterparts, were often chosen and groomed from childhood for their roles. Pollitzer

emphasizes that this grooming and training of the shaman is a direct transmission of traditional African spiritual concepts and says, “no sharp line can be drawn between religion, magic and healing, especially in Africa and the Sea Islands” (143). Before the war, slaves sought help from the root doctor for illness, spiritual guidance and even protection from the pain of their servitude. This was done in secret for fear of reprisal from the slave owner. In his 1849 memoir, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*, the author recanted several instances of seeking and securing magical assistance from a root doctor to avoid being ill-treated by his master/owner. As with their African counterparts, the root doctors were respected and often feared because of their ability to summon and handle unknown forces. These magical professionals adopted and adapted local herbs and the magical practices of other cultures, such as the Scots-Irish whites and Native Americans, to create a powerful syncretism of beliefs and practices. One such practice was the use of a bottle to trap and contain an evil spirit and as a method of casting a spell. F. Roy Johnson, in his book *The Fabled Doctor Jim Jordon: A Story of Conjure*, indicates that although the root doctor existed before the Civil War, these practitioners only made a prominent impact on Southern society and culture after the war. During Reconstruction, former slaves were without adequate health or spiritual support systems. The root doctor had magical practice and knowledge of herbal lore to restore the health and well-being of those whom suffered from the three recognized types of illness: natural, spiritual and unnatural. No longer suppressed by the slave owners, root doctors found a fertile ground for their magical systems.

### *Three recognized types of illnesses*

**1) Natural:** The practice of Hoodoo developed a classification of illness into those of natural, spiritual and unnatural forces. Add to this idea the traditional of the African view that health and happiness result from a balance of the body, mind and spirit. This holistic view of health led to the idea that illness resulting from natural causes came from “a violation of the balance or harmony believed present in the physical world” (Kirkland 72). Therefore, a person’s physical, mental and spiritual health could be healed by restoring this natural balance of all three elements. In my fieldwork, I discovered that many of my informants made use of both conventional physicians and root doctors, without any sense of conflict or confusion. Each health care provider has a specified role in the maintenance of good health. The most common treatment by

root doctors for natural illness was the preparation of an herbal remedy. Most root doctors were master herbalists who were trained by their mentors or members of the community. The knowledge and use of herbs was widespread in the Low Country. According to Yronwode, in *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic: A Materia Magica of African-American Conjure and Traditional Formulary, Giving the Spiritual Uses of Natural Herbs, Roots, Minerals, and Zoological Curios*, another source for this knowledge was contained in a 16th-century belief in the “Doctrine of Signatures,” from Genesis 1:29, which is the idea that “every plant was put on this Earth by God for the use of mankind” (18).

According to the Doctrine of Signatures, one could locate and identify the use of an herb by a particular physical characteristic of the plant, which resembled the organ or part of the body it was Divinely assigned to cure. For example, a heart-shaped flower or leaf could be an indication that this herb was meant to treat illnesses of the heart.

**2) Spiritual:** In the realm of spiritual illness, it is believed that we can also become vulnerable to illness as a result of some act of moral turpitude, which will leave us more vulnerable to physical illness and spiritual or unnatural predations. A healthy mind and body was considered a Divine reward for moral fortitude and ethical adherence to conventional moral precepts. Many times in my childhood and especially during my adolescence, I can remember illnesses and being asked by my family what I could have done to bring these maladies upon myself. In *Herbal and Magical Medicine*, Holly Matthews says, “The victims of root work are often those individuals who have lost God’s protection because of sins committed in the past” (79). According to Wilbur Watson in *Black Folk Medicine: The Therapeutic Significance of Faith and Trust*, illness was seen as “the result of willful violation of sacred beliefs or of sin such as adultery, theft or murder” (2). It is believed, for example, that a woman who has seduced another woman’s lover or husband is particularly vulnerable to a curse from the woman she has insulted by her wrong actions. In one sense, a spiritual illness is the karmic or cause-and-effect result of the old adage, “what goes around, comes around.” The effects of this kind of illness can be lessened or cured by traditional repentance and an attempt at retribution, such as returning the item stolen or a sincere apology to those who were initially wronged.



**3) Unnatural:** Unnatural illness, on the other hand, was seen as imposed upon or caused by the harmful actions of an outside force, either human or a non-physical entity. According to my informants, there is no definitive way to prepare for an unnatural illness (or magical assault), although many people take care to provide themselves with ongoing protection in the form of a charm. They may wear the charm upon their person and or place magical protective devices in and around their home. Examples of protective charms include wearing a piece of silver jewelry. If the silver turns black over a very short period of time (even overnight), the tarnish is a clear indication of the presence of evil or that harmful forces have been directed against you. Placing a large piece of iron under your bed or a line of salt on your windowsill will provide protection to the home. One can also secure a personal protective root/charm from a qualified root doctor. This type of charm should be carried or worn for protection. Even so, I was once told by a young African American root doctor from Columbia (SC), “If I want to get to you, I will.” He then added, “I’ll come in the night, in your dreams, and you’ll never know what hit you. Most white folks like to pretend that if they don’t believe in it, they’re safe, sure, just go on thinking that.” For whatever bravado he may have been exhibiting at that moment, he said it with sincere conviction.

To remedy this type of illness required the services of the minister or, failing that, the conjure doctor who would usually employ a combination of therapies to rid the afflicted person of this negative influence. Often the treatment would work, and the illness would abate. If it did not, as Long points out in *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, “the failure was blamed on the victim for waiting too long to seek help or for not following the instructions” of the root doctor (78). The signs of an unnatural illness were many and varied from a general feeling of uneasiness, an unexplained rash, sharp pains or numbness in the extremities, a feeling of disassociation and withdrawal from the world and people, sudden emotional outburst, irrational behavior, even the feeling that something is crawling inside you. Some informants describe this last symptom as “like having snakes in your body.” All my informants agreed that in such situations, time was critical and the root doctor’s help must be secured as soon as possible before this curse “takes hold of you.” If allowed to develop, the consequences can only be tragic.

I was introduced to an elderly African American woman known as “Granny Harmon” by a

classmate, who was her grandson. Mrs. Harmon, a retired schoolteacher told me of a time during her childhood when her older sister was accused of stealing another woman's lover. Apparently, the woman scorned sought the services of a root doctor near their home in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and had a curse placed upon Mrs. Harmon's sister. Soon this sister became listless, refusing to eat and unable to sleep even after a hard day's work. She would pace her room, complaining of pains in her leg and manifesting scratches on her arms and back. She eventually became bed-ridden, lying motionless and staring at the ceiling. She was plagued with horrendous nightmares, and the entire family became concerned for her physical and mental stability. The local minister was called in, but his blessing and exorcism had little effect. Finally, in desperation, the family summoned a woman from a neighboring community known for her ability to "take off the root and kill it."

When the root doctor arrived, she examined the older sister, who was, by this time, almost comatose and unresponsive to vocal commands or to touch. After sending most of the family out into the hall, she began to search the room where the sister lay. After some time, she found a charm that looked like a carrot wrapped in cloth, which had been nailed in the dark recesses of the closet. As she held it out to show to the family, the sister shrieked and sat upright in her bed. The healer then walked out onto the front porch and plunged the root into a bucket of salt water, which she had asked the family to prepare before her visit. As she plunged the root into the salt water, the older sister shrieked again and fell back onto her bed. When the family rushed to her side, they found her responsive for the first time in days.

I learned that salt water is widely believed to be a neutralizer of negative psychic energy. When I asked what happened next, I learned that the healer/root doctor came back into the house and "laid a blessing on Sister." She also helped to psychically secure the room from future harm by placing salt in the windows and giving the sister a charm to hang on her bedpost. She then instructed the family on how to protect the entire household and what to watch for should the attacks resume.

"What happened to the root?" I asked. "Oh, she took it off with her. I guess she got rid of it." The sister soon recovered her health and mental well-being and was never troubled again in this way. She apparently told her sister that being cursed was "like having something on your back

and in your head, weighing you down and stealing your life.”

### *A repertoire of magical skills*

There is a common modern belief among those who view these phenomena from the outside that the person to be attacked must be made aware that he or she is under attack for the curse to work. No one with whom I have spoken as an informant felt that knowing about the attack was necessary, or that the educational level or cultural background of the person being attacked had any effect on the outcome. James E. McTeer, of Beaufort, South Carolina, was a root doctor and the local sheriff. McTeer once echoed my Columbia informant when he told me I was an easy target for psychic attack, precisely because I was educated and was given to trying to find a rational explanation for everything. “You are easier to get to because you don’t recognize or accept what is happening to you,” he said. “A person from around here will run quick to the root doctor to get it (the curse) taken off and they’ll be okay. You will wander around trying to rationally figure it out until you’re in a hell of a state.” As we will see later in this book, an attack can come suddenly, without warning and without provocation. Therefore, in addition to healing physical illnesses with herbs and potions, a set of magical abilities became part of the repertoire of the root doctor, which includes the following skills:

The first magical skill expected of the root doctor is the ability to recognize the presence of, and then be able to remove, a curse or “trick” placed on an individual by an outside force, which then causes an unnatural illness. The root doctor may treat the person in his office or travel to the person’s residence and locate the offending root that has been placed or hidden there. When found, the root doctor will ceremoniously remove the root and take it away or “kill” it on the spot. In several accounts, the root doctor, after killing the root (rendering it harmless), offered the root to the victim as a souvenir. One African American informant from Columbia described burying or burning the root as the best way of destroying its power, while another maintained that water, especially salt water, would render the root harmless. Other common charms for causing harm might be: a jar or bottle filled with sharp objects, a specific harmful herb, dirt from a graveyard or specially prepared powder like “goofer-dust” (to further enhance the negative effect), a personal item from the intended victim to personalize the charm, and

possibly a medium to contain it like oil, urine or whiskey along with an empowering or animating ingredient like a lodestone.

The magical second skill expected of the root doctor is the ability to help restore the social balance created by some act of magical retribution. First, the root doctor identifies the attacking party, then helps the victim turn the tables on the tormentor, by magically acting on their behalf. This is done by turning the spell back onto the person believed to have perpetrated the magical aggression. A patient may be given a powder to spread or a charm to bury to reverse the curse or to inflict revenge on their enemy.

I had a young female informant from Columbia, who attended the University of South Carolina. Her father was a root doctor. She spoke of his ability to “turn it [the curse] back on the root doctor who had sent it by returning the offending root to the root doctor’s property or by simply casting the spell back through his power of concentration and projection of mental energy.” She described an incident where the offending root doctor actually appeared on their doorstep one day and asked her father to take his own original curse off him. It appears that he had recognized the physical and psychic signs of the reversal, and through the community, learned which root doctor had turned it back on him. This young woman’s father was, like many other root doctors, a devout Christian. He therefore made the afflicted root doctor swear to stop casting evil roots before agreeing to release him from the one under which he was currently suffering.

Sheriff McTeer recounted a similar conclusion to a psychic war he had with the famous Doctor Buzzard. McTeer ordered Dr. Buzzard to stop selling potions. This particular war of curse and counter-curses ended with the drowning death of Dr. Buzzard’s son. Soon after, Dr Buzzard visited McTeer and the two men made peace and became friends of a sort.

Over the years, on several occasions I have been asked to magically help a client cause harm to someone. I usually refuse outright and try to reason with the person to use other ways of dealing with their anger and fear. On one occasion in 2005, however, I conducted a spiritual healing ritual for an old friend in middle Tennessee. The healing appeared to provide some relief from a painful debilitating nerve disorder. At the end of the ritual, my friend, a late middle-aged woman, asked me to create a root or magical device for the purpose of hurting a man by whom she felt threatened.

I asked her, “Are you sure this is what you want? Remember that things you do will eventually find their way back to you.” She seemed adamant in her assertions and intent, so I opened my box of magical ingredients and prepared a root containing “goofer” dust, a lodestone for energy and other herbal ingredients traditionally designed to cause harm. After charging it, I handed it to her and told her to keep it in a secure place. When she needed to inflict harm on this person, she was to visualize him and squeeze the charm with all her might. She seemed satisfied and we soon left for the drive back to Kentucky.

On the way home, my wife asked me, “What do you think she’ll do?”

I replied that she was basically a kind, decent person who was just hurting and afraid. “Just wait and see!” I replied. “I believe that once she thinks about what she is doing, she will reconsider.”

About two weeks later, the same woman telephoned and asked if she could get rid of the root because she “did not like having it around anymore.” I told her to bury it in a place sacred to her. This woman practices Native American spirituality and is a gifted psychic, so I am sure that upon reflection, she remembered, that to intentionally inflict harm on another is to harm one’s self and those you love as well. Fear and anger, while powerful motivators, tend to make a person reckless and prone to seek immediate answers. Fear also empowers the person causing the harm. It also betrays a lack of faith in one’s own abilities and faith in the Divine’s overall plan and our part in it. As Lee Gandee would say “Your fear and your anger is your worst enemy in magic. Calm down, and think before you strike.”

The third magical skill expected of a root doctor is the ability to provide magical protection for his or her clients. This is performed through rituals and/or the creation of charms that would provide protection, provide luck, gain the affections of another, win at games of chance, win in a legal matter or a host of other needs, limited only by the patient’s desires and ability to compensate the root doctor. Names for these types of protective amulets are many, including mojo bags, Tobies, tricks or roots. The root doctor might supply a simple amulet for the person to wear or hang in the home. Additional magical protection may be to provide a mixture of herbs and powders with which to bathe or wash the floors and walls to magically cleanse a dwelling.

The actual formulas for these charms are as varied as the practitioners who create them; however, certain rules are generally followed. For example, the symbolism of color is fairly consistently employed, with blue for love, green for money, black for harm and red for protection. Red flannel is the most common packaging medium for the ingredients of a protective charm/root. Its historical use is traceable to the African, Caribbean and European magical traditions. Newell Niles Puckett in his study of Hoodoo charms, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* said, "In both Europe and Africa it may well be that the red color represents what was formerly sacrificial blood offered to the fetish in question" (221). A charm may be a complex mixture of ingredients or may take a form as simple as wearing a piece of silver as a disrupter of negative energy. In the past, a silver dime was often worn as an amulet tied to the ankle with a piece of red string.

As stated above, often a root will contain a biological product like animal bones, teeth, or human blood, semen, hair, or fingernails. These personal items are included to tie the effect of the charm to a certain individual. Personalization of the charm is critical to the casting of the spell. A love charm often might contain some part of the intended lover's person or some part of the person casting the spell. Menstrual blood was a commonly used component in charms for women in hopes of securing the affections of a lover. With the modern threat of diseases like AIDS, the popular use of such products has waned but not disappeared. I once observed the creation and charging of a charm that was to be used to reinvigorate a husband's sexual ability, which, for some reason, had lost the required vigor and stamina. The charm contained a wax image with a wooden phallus and the man's pubic hair to personalize the charm, which was then wrapped in a red flannel sheath. His wife then added a bit of her own personal lubrication to ensure that when invigorated, his abilities would remain focused toward her. The charm was then placed in the mattress underneath where the man slept as a sort of magical Viagra. As was later reported to me, the charm had produced the desired effect, in abundance!

*Where there's a need, there's merchandizing!*

This need for certain supplies in creation of these charms led to the commercialization of the Hoodoo charm and the creation of an entire network of suppliers and distributors. Long traces the beginnings of this unique American enterprise from its roots in the early 1900s, through their

heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, to their modern manifestations. These businesses are still economically viable and have been invigorated by the influx of individuals from the Caribbean and South America. According to Long, the “spiritual products industry is evolving and expanding” (249).

I remember asking the Beaufort root doctor and sheriff, James McTeer, about the commercially produced materials and the need to go foraging in the woods for the herbs, roots and other naturally occurring items needed to prepare the charms or roots needed in their practice. He readily acknowledged that he and most of the root doctors he knew no longer foraged the woods and swamps for their magical supplies, but purchased them from supply houses from as far away as Chicago and New York.

A final traditional role expected of the root doctor was the ability to communicate with the unseen world of spirits and other forces that affected the lives of their clients. The world of spirits is routinely consulted during the diagnosis phase of the treatment of an illness. This is because the spirits are not bound by physical form and are witness and privy to information outside the range of the embodied. Spirit communication can be employed for diagnosing the source of an illness or locating the whereabouts of a missing person or thing. Communication with the spirit world often involves entering a deep trance state. The root doctor’s skill of projecting his own spirit or consciousness into this unseen realm for purposes of spirit communication is related to the widespread Low Country belief that each human is in possession of two souls—or two aspects of the same soul—depending on who you interview. In their article “The Gullah Language and Sea Island Culture,” Dennis Adams and Hillary Barnwell describe a process of soul division: “the ‘soul’ leaves the body and returns to God at death, but the ‘spirit’ stays on earth—still involved in the daily affairs of its living descendants.” Such a metaphysical belief also creates the need for honoring one’s ancestors. As a result, formal mourning rituals are conducted and burial practices are elaborate, often involving grave decoration, which include broken household items and natural substances, like seashells, which symbolize “the belief that the dead reside in a realm beneath river bottoms” (“Religion” 1).

Many of the activities of the root doctor are conducted while in a state of light to moderate trance. One root doctor described the trance process as being between asleep and being awake. In

this enhanced state of awareness, spirits appear to the root doctor according to his or her state of mind. “You’d better be in the right frame of mind when you deal with spirits,” one elderly woman from Georgetown, South Carolina advised me, “If you aren’t, they (the spirits) can sure mess you up!” Clearly, spirit communication is not a game, an experiment or a process to be taken lightly. Most root doctors have a single spirit or a select few entities that they trust and from whom they will accept information. Sometimes the spirit is a trusted relative who has died.

I had a conversation with the young female informant noted above (the daughter of a root doctor, and, I believe, his successor) about her family’s experiences with spirit contacts:

**RD:** My Daddy always talks to his mother! She is always in our home and I’ve seen her, too.

**JM:** When do you see her?

**RD:** Daddy taught me how to see her. You relax, close your eyes, but not all the way, and let your mind empty and then think about her. After a while, things begin to look different.

**JM:** In what way?

**RD:** It just does, not like regular life. The room looks the same, but it’s like a curtain is lifted and there’s more there than you normally see. Pretty soon, Grandma comes in, just like when she was living. She always looks happy and smiles.

**JM:** Does she talk to you?

**RD:** Not like you and I are now. She talks to you in your mind.

**JM:** Can she touch you?

**RD:** Yes, of course! I even feel her touch me when I can’t see her. She even saved me from being badly hurt one time.

**JM:** How?

**RD:** I was out riding one Saturday with some friends.... Everybody was drinking, you know. All of a sudden, I felt Grandma grab my arm and heard her say in my ear “Get out of this car!”



Nobody else heard her. I made them stop and let me out at my house. They all thought I was crazy, but later that night they were all in a bad wreck.

**JM:** Incredible! Did you know your Grandma before she passed away?

**RD:** I was small when she died, but I remember her. I love her being around now, it makes me feel safe.

Above everything else, the spirits of the dead must be treated with respect and appeased when they are angry or disturbed. The living must secure ways to communicate with these spirits, and the root doctor is the vehicle for that communication. One additional expectation is that the root doctor can also summon and employ certain spirits to do his or her bidding in some magical matter. The use of graveyard dirt in a charm is done to secure the services of the spirit by binding that spirit to that charm and spell. The root doctor will seek the grave dirt of an individual who has been executed, done grave harm in life or committed suicide, because that spirit is trapped between the worlds and may be desperate to make amends to God for his transgressions as an embodied person. Sometimes, however, a magical intrusion stems from the attack of an evil or rogue spirit such as the famous “plat-eye.” E. Randall Floyd, in the *Augusta Chronicle Online*, describes it “as a much-feared spirit that supposedly haunted and tormented its victims unmercifully before driving them either to insane asylums or early graves” and adds

According to legends probably brought over from Europe, plat-eyes were evil spirits that came back to life for one of several reasons to avenge their deaths, to cause mischief among mortals, or to finish up tasks begun in life. Failure to provide the departed with a proper burial was also a good way to warrant an unwelcome visit by the plat-eye. (1)

As we can see, the fear of the plat-eye was tied to traditional beliefs in the spirits of the ancestors and the observance of proper funeral customs. One young woman from Orangeburg, South Carolina, told me that you could not normally see a plat-eye but, if you were unlucky, feel its presence on lonely stretches of road near rural cemeteries. She said, “When I pass a cemetery at night by myself, I say the Lord’s Prayer and hit the gas pedal!”

Another common manifestation of spirit attack is called being “hag ridden.” In this situation, a

spirit or shape-shifting witch has projected their consciousness into victim's bedroom and attacked them by sitting on the victim's chest while hitting, biting, scratching or slapping the victim, leaving them feeling dreadful and exhausted in the morning. As in our earlier examples, additional signs of attack by a spirit or "haint" include finding a person in an unresponsive or trance-like state. It can also appear as a sudden change in habits and personality or persistent and intense nightmares that leave physical signs, such as unexplained scratches and bruises. Such evidence indicates that a conventional doctor must first be consulted and then in the absence of any natural cause, a root doctor should be sought without delay. A person can also protect himself or herself from being hag-ridden by placing certain charms on the bedpost, putting salt on the open windowsill or placing a large piece of iron under the bed to act as a barrier to the psychic energy. Such an evil or rogue spirit can also be trapped by the root doctor in a jug or bottle and thereby rendered harmless. Low Country author Cornelia Walker Bailey, in her book, *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man*, describes the process of trapping the hag:

But there was only one way you could stop the hag from visiting altogether. You could put salt in an open bottle and leave it near the bed and the hag would fly into that bottle with the salt. The salt would hold her there and she couldn't get out. In the morning, you'd put a cap on the bottle and you'd say, "I gotcha now" and you could actually hear the hag screaming in the bottle, "let me out, let me out." You buried the bottle in the ground then the hag wouldn't bother you no more. (142)

I was once shown a bottle by Lee Gandee in the Dutch Fork of South Carolina that was said to have been imprisoning an evil spirit for more than a hundred years. It was clouded and had salt and hair woven inside the neck of the bottle. When asked if I'd like to be the one to open the bottle, I respectfully declined.

### **The Root Doctor's Magic: What Is It and How Does It Work?**

All shamans, whether root doctors, powwows or grannies, practice the same essential types of magic, which are:

#### *Sympathetic magic*

The 19th-century anthropologist James Gordon Frazer, in his famous work, *The Golden Bough*,

defines the principle of sympathetic magic as “that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause” (“Sympathetic” 1). This magical practice has its roots in what he calls the Law of Similarity. Frazer says the “magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it” (1). An example in Hoodoo practice would be the casting of a spell upon an object that has been constructed to resemble or otherwise symbolically represent the person. A wax or wooden image of a person is dressed in certain colors and is anointed with certain powders, oils or symbols as the spell is cast. If the doll were to contain hair or other items owned by or physically related to the person, the additional element of contagious magic would be brought into play.

One classic charm, from the famous Madam Collins of Memphis, would allow a woman to control her lover’s potency so that unless he was with her, he could not perform and would “lose his nature.” Carolyn Morrow Long records in *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce* that the recipe required the use of a cloth or length of cord with which she was “to wipe the semen from her lover’s penis after intercourse, tie the cloth in nine knots and wear it next to her skin or hidden in her mattress” (87). This particular version of sympathetic magic is called homeopathic magic, or the use of small portions of a thing to represent and affect the intended object of the magic. A specially prepared image, often containing some physical possession or personal element like hair, fingernails or skin of a person may be manipulated in some manner in the belief that actions taken on this substitute will then have an effect of the intended person. A well-known modern example of this magical practice is the desecration and burning of an effigy of a hated person, despised political figure or even a dummy figure from rival sports team. Although most modern people would, upon being questioned, would never admit or acknowledge the magical process involved, they will still invest great time and energy in such a magically focused event. Imitation of the action desired is the key to this sort of magical practice. Even today, women who wish to bear children will travel to the Dorset countryside and lightheartedly sit upon the huge phallus of the 180-foot-tall Cerne Abbas Giant, which is carved into the hillside where chalk deposits lie right beneath the surface of the land. Dancing around the festive maypole on May Day has long been recognized as a survival of an old rite of fertility and a form of sympathetic magic.

### *Contagious magic*

The second major type of magic is called contagious magic. Frazer defines contagious magic as the belief that “things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other” (“Contagious” 1). In this practice, there exists a belief in an interconnected relationship between all people and things in the universe. A good example of contagious magic would be the casting of a spell by placing a charm or powder where the intended recipient will come into contact with it and be affected. The famous root doctor, Dr Buzzard, of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, was known for spreading powder in the courtroom before a criminal or civil trial to affect those who would come into contact with or see it rendering them unable to give evidence as a witness and I suspect to influence the jury as well. Another common technique employed in contagious magic would be for the root doctor to bury a root somewhere inside the house or on the property of the intended victim. Often people would report feeling a sudden pain as they passed over the object. This was an indication of the presence of a malevolent spell, which is actually a form of magical poisoning. As a young root doctor from Columbia, South Carolina, said, “When I was young, my grandfather [also a root doctor] would bury a root out by the back porch where the person he was after would be sure to step on it. Once he did, that was it!”

### **Famous Carolina Root Doctors**

Reminiscent of their African counterparts, root doctors in the Low Country would often assume a name that symbolized their particular practice or personality. Three of the most famous traditional root doctors of the coastal Carolina area took the names of birds or insects; hence, there were names like Dr. Hawk, Dr. Bug, Dr. Eagle, Dr. Snake, Dr. Crow and the most famous of all, Dr. Buzzard. Many operated out of rented space or from their homes, like Dr. Eagle (born P.C. Washington), who was remarkable for his deep, piercing eyes. Many had other sources of income, like Dr. Hawk, who ran his own grocery store.

Most of the old time root doctors were recognized early in their lives as having a special personal quality that gave them access to the world of spirits and the ability to heal. It is widely believed that a child who is born with a caul or membrane over the face at birth has been chosen by the spirit world for a special role in life. The survival from a dangerous accident or a miraculous

recovery from a near-fatal illness can bestow such a spiritual mantle. In these cases, the living soul has passed temporarily into the spirit realm and returned to this existence, bringing back some of the otherworldly presence. Being born with a particularly dark complexion was thought to confer special powers for working magic or communicating with the spirit world.

In her memoir, *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geechee Talks about Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia*, Cornelia Walker Bailey recalls a powerful female root doctor she calls “Mama Lizzie.” Mama Lizzie was not a community healer but someone you consulted when you wanted “to put an evil spell on somebody” (Bailey 191). Known for her cruelty, vindictiveness and short temper, Mama Lizzie was feared and respected throughout the island community, regardless of educational level or position in life. Bailey recounts how an affront to one of Mama Lizzie’s sisters was handled by magically and fatally poisoning the offender. Bailey recalls, “One of the things I’ve learned from living on a small island where our roots have been for two hundred years is that our traditions get passed down, yes, but so do our hurts and angers. They get handed down from generation to generation” (194).

#### \*\*\*\*\**The legendary Doctor Buzzard*

Little is known of the early life of the most famous South Carolina Low Country root doctor of modern times, Dr. Buzzard, who was said to “be as powerful as a buzzard and to have the patience of a buzzard” (Bailey, 2000,190). He was born Stephaney Robinson, lived and operated on St. Helena Island where his power and influence became unrivaled. Root doctor and high sheriff James McTeer said that Dr. Buzzard was particularly adept at “chewing the root” in court. He would simply sit in the court, behind his purple sunglasses, staring at the proposed witness. The effect was devastating to a prosecuting attorney, who found he had a witness who had become completely incapable of giving testimony.

“Chewing the root” is a powerful form of spell-casting, which is witnessed by the intended victim and usually others nearby. “Chewing the root” demonstrates the two facets of the root doctor’s spell-casting. The first concerns the personal magical power he or she can summon and the ability to focus that power externally with intention and tangibility. The second involves the public practice of that magical power, where it is witnessed and understood by the victim and the community. This action creates and enhances the personal reputation of the root doctor if the

spell is deemed to be effective and the perception of his or her power becomes a part of the collective perception of reality for the community.

Roger Pinckney, in *Blue Roots: African-American Folk Magic of the Gullah People*, describes how “a root doctor makes up a root, tracks down his victim and chews it in his presence all the while making signs and speaking in unknown tongues” (indicating a possible state of trance). “The effect is terrifying—the doctor swaying, muttering, eyes rolled back in his head, juice from the root running down his chin..., often bringing the victim to his knees” (Pinckney 54).

It is important to note that in Hoodoo, a spell or root can be delivered through the eyes or the voice. The concept behind this projection centers on the belief that the power of the soul can be seen and witnessed and hence projected through the eyes and voice. The life-energy of a person’s will has the ability to travel in this manner to wherever it is directed. This concept is at the heart of shamanic spell-casting. The practice of projection transcends cultures.

Some readers will invariably ask, “But is this really happening? Can they really do that?” To answer these questions, we must examine our own perception of reality, which is largely the result of an unconscious, collective agreement as to what our reality is at this moment in history.

All cultures are in a constant process of defining their collective reality, based on current evidence and the information they receive as an ongoing process of being self-aware, embodied entities. A person’s perception of reality is also impacted by the claims of the socially dominant group. As we have seen in the colonial period, the socially dominant group determined that those without power and wealth deserved to be viewed as inferior and deserved social exploitation. That perception of reality became the lens through which they saw the world, other human beings and life in general. Like all cultures, they formulated and codified their beliefs, designed tests to verify them and drew up the psychological and perceptive boundaries of their worldview. The concept of shamanic projection of personal energy is a perfect example of an idea that exists outside our modern worldview and collective perception of reality. To assert the existence of this idea is a threat to the collective mindset. We must therefore expect it to be challenged and attacked. Small wonder such thinking exists at the social boundaries of our culture and are thought of as the beliefs of a marginal group of people. Those for whom such ideas are a reality or who have been affected by these practices are considered deluded or deceived. Yet even our

modern culture of scientific rationalism will suspend its collective social dominance and critical assessment of its worldview to accommodate the beliefs of conventional, socially accepted religious practices and beliefs no matter how similar or fantastic those beliefs may appear to be. The reality of projection and magical practice in general seems to peck at the walls of that conventional worldview, offering a hint at just what might be beyond its gates.

Sometimes the root doctor's name became his or hers as an inheritance or by appropriation, as with Dr. Buzzard, who took his name from an earlier Caucasian root doctor. This earlier root doctor, according to Henry Middleton Hyatt, died around the turn of the last century (1414, 1418). The modern Dr. Buzzard, like most root doctors, charged for his services and potions, and became quite wealthy in the process. As large numbers of African Americans moved Northern cities, taking their beliefs and customs like spiritual baggage, root doctors like Dr. Buzzard often served these clients via telephone calls and the postal service. Dr. Buzzard, like many of his counterparts, was extremely knowledgeable and careful of the laws surrounding the sale of "homemade medicines." My informant told me that Dr. Buzzard, realizing that to cash his money orders would require his signature and hence incriminate him, stood in the post office and ripped to pieces more than ten thousand dollars' worth of postal money orders.

Pinckney illustrates a valid and ironic paradox of the struggle between the traditional healer, the legal system and medical profession when he says,

There is no law in South Carolina against the removing of spells or against the casting of them even if such hexes result in disability and death. But if a root doctor gives a client a salve, a body oil or any potion to be taken internally, he can be cited for 'practicing medicine without a license' regardless of how effective or benign the substance might be. (50)

Pinckney's statement also reflects the professional territoriality and social perception of root doctors and other non-traditional healers who operate outside the culture of scientific rationalism. To prosecute a person for casting or removing a spell would be to acknowledge that it exists. Without that acknowledgment, no matter the cost, it can simply be ignored and derided as superstitious nonsense.

Stephaney Robinson, "Dr. Buzzard," died in 1947. His earthly remains reside in an unmarked

grave, the location of which is kept a closely guarded secret to this day, to prevent grave desecration, as the bones of one so revered and feared would have great magical and monetary value.

Other root doctors, in their zeal or greed were not as careful as Dr. Buzzard and occasionally ran afoul of the law. In his autobiography, *High Sheriff of the Low-country*, J.E. McTeer gives an account of the exploits of “Dr. Bug” during the Second World War. Dr. Bug (Peter Murray) was not a typical root doctor but was apparently an enterprising individual who saw an opportunity and took it. Without training, he set himself up in practice, selling potions to young men who wished to evade the draft. McTeer says, “Dozens of young colored [sic] men were being rejected at their pre-induction physicals and were coming home classified 4-F” (24). This brought about a police and FBI investigation, which uncovered that Dr. Bug had been supplying these young men with an arsenic-laced potion that could have killed them if they’d taken too much. Dr. Bug lost his practice and went to prison for his carelessness and greed.

I must not give the impression that root doctors are limited to the South Carolina Low Country. The root doctor is not just a rural phenomenon but, according to Dr. Hazel Weidman, who studied the practice and clinical treatment in Miami in the 1970s, “You’ll find root work of one form or another in any urban area of the country that has a large black population” (qtd. in Michaelson 39). Root doctors have appeared wherever African Americans and many Southern whites lived and needed their services. In Newport, Arkansas, Aunt Caroline Dye was widely known for the efficacy of her cures, charms and her ability to commune with spirit forces. In his excellent biography, *The Fabled Doctor Jim Jordan: A Story of Conjure*, Roy Johnson details the life of a conjure doctor in the Murfreesboro area of North Carolina. Jordan had a shamanistic career that spanned almost fifty years, and he was known far beyond the boundaries of his community. Born to parents who had been slaves, Jordan claimed that his knowledge had its roots with the practices of the local Native Americans. There are local accounts from the 1700s of Indian chiefs sending for African American slave-healers when illness struck. This strongly indicates ongoing social contact and the presence of trained healers and spirit shamans among the slave population.

Jordan, like so many of his counterparts in the Carolinas and Georgia, openly professed that his



power and practice were an enhancement of his Christian faith, yet, according to Johnson, many in his community continued “harboring dark fear of the mysterious workings of the spirit world [and] would not abandon suspicion he abstained completely from black magic” (1).

Jim Jordan’s personal story is typical of many root doctors. His childhood was steeped in local traditions and lore, including, Johnson notes in his biography, the presence of anti-theft charms like “blue bottles containing an assortment of things hanging from a white lady’s peach trees” (36). First, hanging the charm bottles in the tree was the magical work of a “white lady,” indicating the prevalence and exchange of magical practices between both races. The use of “witch bottles” is traceable to its origins in the British Isles. Second, the fact that such a sight was easily recognized and interpreted by members of the African American community is indicative of significant social interaction and a commonality of this type of symbolism. The use of bottles, pots and other containers for magical purpose also is traceable to the African subcontinent.

Jordan learned much of his practice, which included herb- and spirit-based remedies, from an uncle who was a well known conjure doctor. Like many of his contemporaries, he attended school and had a very basic education, meaning he could read and write. Upon his uncle’s death, Jordan took over his practice and quickly became well known and patronized. It is important to note that his magical practice was, for most of his life, a lucrative sideline, while he managed a successful farming and logging business with his sons. Caught ill-prepared for the farm reforms of the 1950s, Johnson says, “Jordan’s conjure business saved him from bankruptcy” (119). It is for his magical practice and his civic generosity that James Jordan is remembered to this day. Upon his death in 1962, his status as a physical, psychological and spiritual healer had reached legendary proportions. His life story illustrates that, as often as not, the root doctor was a productive and respected member of the community, who was, in addition to his magical practice, also immersed in the ordinary life of the community as well.

### **The Darker Side of Conjure**

As noted earlier, most root doctors and healers demonstrate some ability or aptitude for this work as children and were and are groomed for their work. Some, like a grandmotherly woman from

Georgetown, were healers with a singular ability to correct one type of injury or illness. This woman had the ability to “talk the fire” or heal burned skin. Not only would the pain vanish, but often, no trace of the burn would remain after her “treatment.” It must be stated that most of these people profess themselves to be good Christians and considered the healing work “a calling” from the Divine. “It’s all a blessing from the Lord!” the healer from Georgetown would remind me. “I can do this because God says so, not because I say so.” On the other hand, there were other individuals who took on the more suspect role of conversing with the dead, which was always seen as walking a thin line between good and evil. There were also those who become enamored with the power they have and decide at some point to, use their magic and powers to cause harm.

During my fieldwork, I learned of a very powerful, but ruthless root doctor from down on the Georgia coast. This man held an entire community in his power and tolerated no challenge to his dominance. Once, when challenged by another conjure woman, the old root doctor somehow caused her house to burn, killing her child. The local minister chose the boy’s funeral to deliver a fiery denouncement of witchcraft and root doctors. As the congregation arrived at the small rural church the next Sunday, they were greeted by a gruesome response from the root doctor. On the steps of the church, attached to the top of a pole was the decapitated head of the little boy buried just the week before. The message was clear, and no further challenges were heard in that small rural community. No police were summoned, no charges filed. This story is not designed to titillate but to illustrate the fact that this type of activity was and is not a parlor game but a deadly serious business.

If a root doctor magically caused someone’s death, no police would interfere, but the community might decide that his presence could no longer be tolerated. While doing my initial fieldwork in the mid-1970s, on my way to class, I would often pass a small house in downtown Columbia, within a mile of the USC campus and state capitol. The house was unmistakably marked as the home of a root doctor. Upon investigation, I learned that, indeed, a root doctor had taken up residence there and was considered to be a dangerous person, capable of anything. One afternoon as I passed by, I noticed that the house had been magically neutralized. When I asked what had become of the individual who lived there, I was told that he had met with a sudden tragic accident and that his presence would not be missed. I was advised to ask no more questions and

to not mention the person or the incident again. It was made clear to me that what had happened was “for the best.”

It may be difficult for many people today to understand the persistence of such beliefs and to conceive of how such things could happen in an age of mass media and the scientific-rational paradigms of modern society. Please remember that the culture of the root doctor remains a publicly unacknowledged and invisible culture that operates seamlessly in modern life by its own set of rules, ethics and unique perception of reality. It is immune to the incursions of education, social position and outside indoctrination, because it lives in a deep part of the psyches of the people who have, even subconsciously, embraced it through their upbringing or beliefs. James McTeer once told me, “everyone has a belief in this, somewhere in their minds. You may not think you believe in magic, but somewhere in your mind, you do. That’s the part of your mind I can reach when I put a spell on you. It’s the part of your mind you can’t control, like your dreams, and the more you deny it, the stronger it grows.”

Today, many medical and law enforcement professionals do not recognize the signs and signals of a culture that has had centuries of practice in being invisible. Even if they do recognize the signs and make inquiries, they will most likely learn nothing or be fed misinformation. If, for example, a person is found dead under peculiar circumstances or wastes away in a hospital for no apparent cause, basic inquiries are made, nothing is learned and the case goes unsolved.

Remember that for most of its history, official representatives of the government have treated such beliefs with scorn and contempt, further disenfranchising those people and their beliefs from the mainstream culture. As a result of this cultural alienation, these official opinions and ideas carry no weight or authority within the Hoodoo community. Local politicians and upwardly mobile people of the community often publicly deny the existence of a magical culture in their backyard. They fear their community will appear socially backward and that community investment from the outside will be negatively impacted.

Conventional medical practitioners will continue to encounter people and illnesses that reflect these unique beliefs and practices. Many physicians have learned the wisdom of treating such beliefs with respect and working with the patient within the context of those beliefs, which constitute his or her personal reality. Some mental health therapists have employed shamanistic

techniques successfully when treating patients with certain disorders. Many conventional physicians in the Carolina Low Country, like Dr. Edward McNeil and Dr. LaFrance Ferguson, medical director at Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services Inc., have learned that the medical aspects of Hoodoo and root working are worthy of consideration. This is indicated in the following passage by Dean Wills from “Hoodoo Medicine in the Lowcountry,” which appeared in the March 7, 2004, online news magazine *Low-country NOW*:

When she started with the organization more than 16 years ago, Ferguson’s patients would tell her about placing moss in shoes to lower high blood pressure, and using garlic and other unconventional remedies. “Now they’re talking more about medications,” she said.

Ferguson’s reaction, then and now, is to listen. “I was pretty accepting of the beliefs unless I knew it was something that was totally going to cause them some harm. It made them more amendable to using my methods,” she said.

“I was open to hearing them and I did not find them odd and I did not demean them. Sometimes as clinicians we don’t know everything scientifically.”

Dr. Edward McNeil, who has practiced medicine in Beaufort County since 1983, agrees it’s a mistake for physicians “to dismiss Gullah medical practices...” “Some of what (Gullah) people do is some of what we do,” he said. “A lot of these roots and things could have medications. Some roots have diuretics. The problem is the quantification and purification. They might take more or less than the day before.

“What we do is more scientific, (but) the soul is involved in healing as well as the spirit,” he said. (1)

Recently, Hoodoo, as a magical practice has enjoyed a modern revival via the Internet and through the efforts of many teacher-practitioners, such as noted Hoodoo authority and practitioner, Catherine Yronwode of Forestville, California. Yronwode maintains an extensive website containing many informational articles and a spiritual supply house called the Lucky Mojo Curio Company, which sells all the spiritual products needed, from High John Conqueror root for protection to raccoon penis bones for success in gambling. She has published her own excellent book on Hoodoo and teaches an online course in how to practice this magical art.

Yronwode is one of many modern proponents of Hoodoo. Augustine's Spiritual Goods located in Hancock, Michigan, is owned and operated by "Rev. Frank PaPa Doc" and "Miss Alice," who sell a wide variety of products and services, including "Dr. Buzzard's Court Case Powder and Court Case Oil" which draws on the legendary powers of the Beaufort, South Carolina, Dr. Buzzard's ability to affect the outcome of legal proceedings. Many modern root doctors also discreetly advertise themselves in spiritual magazines and even in the classified sections of local newspapers. It has become clear during the writing of this book that even though still basically invisible to the general public, the practice of Hoodoo is still alive and very healthy in this first decade of the twenty-first century. Traditional magical practice remains a relevant and powerful force in the lives of many modern Americans.