

Article

# Adorned by Power: The Individualized Experience of the Mojo Bag

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**Abstract:** In America, no religion better exemplifies the power of the individual than Hoodoo. Within these peripheral communities in the South, enslaved persons created spaces in which individual practitioners could choose which rituals, objects, and beliefs they prioritized for their own salvation. Out of this tradition of “selection” came the development of adornments like Mojo Bags, an amalgamation of objects, both natural and manufactured, that connect the individual directly with the sacred. When adorned with these Mojo Bags, primarily under clothes to assure contact with the skin, practitioners are provided with the power they have previously been denied. I will argue in my paper, therefore, that this method of adornment provides the locus of power needed to address the psychological and physical bondage practitioners faced during the period of enslavement, highlighted by the case of Frederick Douglass’ use of a root that led to his success in fighting with Mr. Covey.

**Keywords:** Hoodoo; literature; American South; Frederick Douglass; Mojo Bags

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## 1. Introduction

Constructed on the outskirts of American society in the 18th and 19th centuries, Hoodoo exemplifies Walter Conser and Rodger Payne’s notion of religion at the “crossroads” or “places of power and transformation[,] . . . place[s] of energy and movement . . . potency and potential . . . [and] also places of exchange” (Conser et al. 2008, p. 1). Forging a practice out of a conglomeration of influences, primarily African Traditional and Diasporic in nature, practitioners of Hoodoo incorporated a multiplicity of ritual objects, practices, and understandings into their preexisting conceptions of the sacred. In doing so, these practitioners thereby established highly individualized and contextualized understandings of divinity and “magick,” or what is understood as a type of magic constructed within the context of a folk culture or tradition, based on accessibility and the perceived “work”-ability with which they were provided within the oppressive slave system. In this paper, I, using Fredrick Douglass’ use of High John the Conqueror root in his conflict with the slave-breaker Covey, will explore the Mojo Bag, as original root work in the African diaspora community and as commercialized magick in the urban migration.

Touching upon the context in which this highly individualized expression of belief arose, I will also examine the importance of the Mojo Bag, through careful analysis of its use and construction by individual root doctors and practitioners, for whom its contents are particularized, as well as its significance for understanding African diaspora religions. By using such a distinctive symbol of this belief system, I will, in turn, break from continuing criticisms of the commodified nature of Hoodoo and argue that, similar to Douglass’ experience with Mr. Covey, the power of these symbols is contained within the believers’ ability to imbue them with spiritual authority. Through my engagement with scholars such as Carolyn Morrow Long and Jeffrey Anderson, both of whom touch upon this issue of commodification, I will further reiterate the complex, highly individualized, and discrete nature of the Hoodoo belief system in the American South. By demonstrating this novel iteration of Hoodoo’s

allowance for individual practitioners to construct their own experience with this multifaceted belief system, I will focus on the highly personal practice of constructing Mojo Bags within this multifaceted tradition and its development in recent centuries.

## 2. Why Are Mojo Bags So Important?

Hoodoo can be defined most accurately as “. . . the folk, spiritual controlling, and healing tradition originating among and practiced primarily, but not exclusively, by captive African Americans and their descendants primarily in the Southern United States” (Hazzard-Donald 2013, p. 2). Though it is almost universally associated with the African-American population in the American South, Hoodoo cannot be accurately described without taking into account the variability of its influences and ritual engagements (ibid.). This diverse and multifaceted belief system manifests itself in the “conjure” traditions we so closely associate with folk magick, ritual objects, and, in some cases, witchcraft. Using Mircea Eliade’s concept of hierophany can better help us conceptualize the nature of this folk religious practice.<sup>1</sup> In his work *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade describes the phenomenon of hierophany as some phenomenon that “expresses in some way some modality of the sacred and some moment in its history” (Eliade and Sheed 1996, p. 2). In other words, hierophanies are an irruption of the sacred in profane time (Doniger et al. 2004, p. 2). In Hoodoo practice, it is the “Two Heads” or learned Hoodoo practitioners that acknowledge this break in profane space, as it is believed that they “can see into two worlds: the corporeal world of everyday existence [or the profane] and the invisible spirit world [or the sacred]” through engagement with a variety of ritual objects and practices (Hazzard-Donald 2013, p. 210).

One of the most profound and well-known manifestations of this power in Hoodoo practice is the Mojo Bag, a tied bag that contains a conglomeration of seemingly non-magical substances that, when combined and “tied” together, create the means by which a Hoodoo practitioner can lay either a trick or the “depositing [of] a Hoodoo amulet or powders . . . so as to harm or change the behavior of the person targeted,” (ibid.) on another person or create positive change in their lives<sup>2</sup> (Whitten 1962, p. 314). Drawing from a plethora of geographic and religious influences, this “magick” remains endemic to the individual as the substances both reflect the multifaceted history of the user and are, in turn, believed to be a “personalized item that carries your personal energy” (Bird 2010, p. 13). These bags contain a plethora of different symbolically magick elements and are worn in a place where the bag can make contact with the skin, relying on the principle of contagion or the idea that “objects, once in contact, continue to influence each other” (Anderson 2007, p. 9) to establish a transference of magick from the elements of the bag onto the wearer. The traditionally profane concept of “contamination” is thereby restructured in Hoodoo, as it no longer reflects a movement from the sacred to the profane, but instead highlights the expanding sense of the sacred, as the “sacred” is both instilled into the formerly profane “bag” by the wearer and, subsequently, reincorporated into the wearer through her belief in the power of its contents.

In Frederick Douglass’ memoir, *A Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass*, this conferral of power is revealed in his dealings with the slave master known as “Mr. Covey,” a notoriously violent slave-breaker who, after just a week, “gave me a very severe whipping, cutting [my] back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on [my] flesh as large as [my] little finger” (Douglass and Garrison 1846, p. 51). Following this initial beating, Douglass’ time with Mr. Covey continued to devolve into a constant cycle of battery and intimidation which, after a particularly cruel beating, leads Douglass to flee the estate and head into the woods where he encounters a Hoodoo practitioner named Sandy. In his dealings with this “old adviser,” Douglass is handed a piece of root and told:

<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the criticisms exacted upon Eliade in regards to the assumptive and general nature of his analysis of religion, however his engagement with “hierophany” or materialism and religion on the periphery of traditional religious societies creates a useful framework for my discussion of Hoodoo.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Mojo Bags see (Whitten 1962).

I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me.

(*ibid.*, p. 62)

This root, High John the Conqueror, is famous for its use in defending slaves against their abusive masters. Like Frederick Douglass, “John,” or “High John the Conqueror” was an enslaved person living in the American South.<sup>3</sup> Like Douglass, “John” faced countless hardships during his enslavement in Mississippi though; “no matter how much the white folks put on him, John always survived” (Lester and Feelings 1992, p. 62). “John” was not only able to survive under these conditions, but soon learned to thrive under them, as he became famous for constantly eluding bondage through both trickery and “magick.” Thus, his success in “tricking” his slave master, highlighted in the power of the root bearing his legacy, is carried forward through symbolic understanding alone.

This “power” in the subversive legacy of High John becomes apparent in the continuation of Frederick Douglass’ story. When returning to Mr. Covey’s property, Douglass is met with a warm welcome from his usually irate master. Immediately Douglass remarks that he “was half inclined to think the *root* to be something more than [he] at first had taken it to be” (Douglass and Garrison 1846, p. 61). Douglass begins to accept that the root is the source of his power and confirms this inference when he becomes “resolved to fight; and, suiting [his] action to the resolution . . . seized Covey hard by the throat.” (*ibid.*) Fascinated by his own strength in this moment, Douglass simultaneously ascribes a greater sense of power to the root attached to his right hip and, in doing so, instills in himself a confirmation of his own power to overcome the bounds of slavery that had almost broken him. Thus, in this moment, the root with which he “worked” the system of slavery had become an individuated source of power, giving him and only him the power to both subdue and physically control Mr. Covey. It becomes clear that, with Douglass serving as a symbol of the power contained within this belief system, this particularized adornment is a vital part of not only facilitating the overthrow of oppressive forces in the lives of countless Hoodoo practitioners who shared this experience of empowerment, but also in realizing their own agency in such a dehumanizing system.

### 3. How Are These Mojo Bags Constructed?

Exemplified by Frederick Douglass’ experience with Sandy the conjurer, Hoodoo emerged in the 19th century as an individual and highly peripheral tradition. Facing harsh physical and mental turmoil at the hands of their slave masters, slaves forged Hoodoo out of the confluence of peripheral “outgroup” communities. Social Identity Theory argues that “[d]uring socialization [a] child finds a location in the established ‘social construction of reality . . . overlaid by society’s definition of these groups as ‘we’ or ‘they’” (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 208). This denotation of value assigned to these groups of “us” or “not us”, then, constructs the behaviors these children exhibit throughout their lives, namely their reaction to the “outgroup” populations that exist within society, creating the foundation for discrimination through the internalization of a perceived ingroup and, in the case of African American populations in the American South, an “outgroup.” (*ibid.*, p. 208) These “outgroups” consequently are pushed both figuratively and physically to the outskirts of society as, in the 17th century, “slaves who were not employed as house servants were . . . moved out of their owners’ houses

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<sup>3</sup> Through the inclusion of this relation, and in turn this root’s reception, I do not mean to imply that Frederick Douglass, and a number of other enslaved persons during and beyond this period have readily accepted the religious ideology present in Hoodoo. Just as Frederick Douglass was wary of the effects this root would have on his relationship with Covey, so too were many enslaved persons unsure of the effect of Hoodoo on their own lives. And, though this may be true, Douglass, and some others, it should be noted, chose to accept the potential power held within these roots and utilized them within their daily lives, despite such initial misgivings.

to cabins explicitly designated for their use,” (Winberry and Vlach 1994) subsequently physically isolating them from the normative white populations they served.

These populations were by no means static, as the constant death, movement, and displacement of enslaved and minority populations caused a continuous fluctuation in the nature of information being disseminated within these groups. These religious influences, with their ability to transgress racist boundaries, led to a mechanism for support amongst enslaved populations. Consequently, African “outgroups” were able to form their own belief systems that “answered the deeply felt needs within the slaves’ own community,” instead of being forced to favor those within the “ingroup,” white communities (Yokley and Raboteau 1981). This provided a space “that would protect the race from the psychological encroachments of racism and the physical oppression from society” (Hemenway 1986, p. 51). Periphery or the existence of “crossroads,” as Rodger Payne constructs it, therefore allowed for the creation of an “ingroup” culture of support within the system that was designed to promote the inferiority and dehumanization of African-American populations. In the same way that Frederick Douglass accrued agency through his individual will to fight with Mr. Covey aided by the High John the Conqueror root, other Hoodoo practitioners exercised their ritual and mythological knowledge of Hoodoo to instill the sacred into not only the objects around them but also allow this amalgamation of cultural representations to inform their perceptions of self without attention paid to race, class, or history.

Called a variety of names including “bag of tricks, . . . nation sack, gris-gris, hand, mojo, trick bag, luck ball, or flannel [all of which employ] herbs and other magickal ingredients . . . ” (Bird 2009, p. 5) even the nomenclature of the “Mojo Bag” is heavily reliant on the cultural context to which it belongs. Though “nation sack” is a terminology native to Tennessee and “gris-gris” is native to South Carolina’s coastal region and Louisiana, the terms represent the same conferral of power as Frederick Douglass’ rootwork and, in turn, on the enslaved and oppressed as themselves ritually sacred and effective, due to practitioners’ choice to imbue such a power in these substances. The contents of these Mojo Bags are also representative of the individualized “crossroads” culture from which Hoodoo emerges. Drawing upon sacred objects from a variety of different locales such as asafetida, a pungent root common to the Middle East and India, as well as influential persons such as Moses, is the traditional Hoodoo conjure man, who continues to influence ritual Hoodoo thought as practitioners make use of his “6th and 7th books” (Anderson 2008, p. 8; Chireau 2006, p. 25). For Hoodoo practitioners, not unlike Frederick Douglass, these variegated nomenclatures and materials come into play based on their situation, their history, and their individual understanding of ritual sacredness.

The process of constructing these Mojo Bags also serves to highlight the multiplicity of influences that continue to affect this belief system. In addition to asafetida, various constructed and natural elements as well as a clear “intention” are utilized to create the ideal “bag” for each individual practitioner. Take for example the process of assembling a “Kinnikinnik Offering” which is used “as a special way to honor and remember your loved ones on their birthday or anniversary, in a medicine bundle to attract good health and deter negative spirits, or before beginning ceremonial work” (Bird 2009, p. 95). Based on the traditional Algonquin Indian word for the bearberry plant, Hoodoo practitioners draw upon this special combination of juniper, branches, tobacco, and a series of other ingredients<sup>4</sup> that draw their histories from African-American, American-Indian, and other influences to engage with their *individual* ancestors. By embracing the multivalent religious influences that pervaded and still pervade the life of African-American people living throughout the United States, these highly personal manifestations of ritual culture serve as a reminder of the truly individualized nature of African-American being.

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<sup>4</sup> The full recipe, in addition to numerous others, can be found in: (Bird 2009).

#### 4. Does this Individuality Still Exist?

Recently in Hoodoo scholarship, new critiques have been raised regarding the “authenticity” of modern Hoodoo adornment. In *Conjure in African American Society*, Jeffrey Anderson states that Hoodoo has, in the 20th century, undergone a process of what Carolyn Morrow Long identifies as “commodification.” Following the massive shift in African-American urbanization in the 1930s, the authenticity of Hoodoo has been called into question. Due to issues of accessibility and portability, African-American practitioners turned to mail order or, what has long been considered by scholars such as Jeffrey Anderson, “faux” Hoodoo products instead of “authentic” Hoodoo goods, prescribed by a witchdoctor. According to Long, “the trend toward the commodification of traditional charms [that] began around the turn of the twentieth century and accelerated in the 1920s” marked a period in history during which the formerly handmade charms of the Hoodoo root workers became manufactured and began to be sold en masse throughout the South (Long 2001, p. 99). Anderson builds on her assertion that the materialist “soul” of Hoodoo was lost during this decade as he asserts that “[b]y the early twentieth century . . . [H]oodoo was undergoing profound changes” the most prevalent of which was this “commodification” (Anderson 2007, p. 113). The belief system, again according to Anderson, entered an era during which “a form of conjure without conjurers” arose (ibid., p. 115). It seemed as though, according to the conclusions shared by Long and Anderson, that in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Hoodoo had all but broken from its individualistic roots, a tangible result of the trend amongst modern Hoodoo practitioners of “commodifying” Hoodoo practice for the purpose of self-preservation and income, thereby contaminating what she identifies as the “true” nature of the religion. Though their conclusions summarize the historical trend toward the mass marketing of Hoodoo goods and substances, what these scholars fail to acknowledge is the capability of a religion like Hoodoo not only to change but adapt to a variety of cultural norms, thereby retaining its individuality. Consequently, by assuming that factors such as economic success deny this belief system any credibility, these scholars in turn neglect to acknowledge the very independence from such accusations that practitioners exercise in their choice to instill the sacred into these “inauthentic” products. Just as Frederick Douglass imbued into and constructed his own conception of “freedom” on the root he was given, so too do these practitioners confer their belief in the functionality of these Mojo Bags regardless of their origin, or susceptibility to economic pressure. And, in doing so, regardless of their origins or authenticity, these Hoodoo rootworkers invite the sacred into relation with them.

Anderson, examining migration and the universalization of Hoodoo practice, makes the claim that “[t]hroughout the nation conjurers’ charms were giving way to commodities” (ibid., p. 133). For Anderson, these commodities, now available online and in stores across America, marked the end of Hoodoo practice as practitioners of Hoodoo no longer experience the informed consultation required to establish the proper “Mojo Bag” and, therefore, the locative, individualized source of power. This process of detachment is further problematized for Anderson because of the success of “novel” and often non-African-American conjure shops and, subsequently, ritual objects in order to “exploit” the black population in America. Figures like Donald Miller and his nephew, both descendants of Russian Jewish immigrants, as well as Felix Figueroa, who exhibits an outspoken skepticism in dealing with Hoodoo ritual objects despite their choice to sell these objects in the pharmacies they owned, are seen as the antithesis of “true” Hoodoo practice, as their racial difference and economic intentions cause a visible and intentional rift in past and present manifestations of Conjure tradition.

Though these scholars make an assertion that Hoodoo’s integrity has been compromised in the modern era, by assuming that Hoodoo is a racially determined and locative entity that reflects the desires and understandings of the African-American community without taking into account the non-African-American influences and contexts, scholars such as Anderson also assert a fixed “African-American” communal identity by assuming that it “ . . . is an essence, [or] ‘an ahistorical natural kind with a permanent and intrinsic set of features” (Harlan 1997, p. 179). However, according to such pragmatists as William James, “[t]he truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process

... " (James 1908). In the same way that culture is remade with every generation (Asante 1998, p. 11), "conjure" culture continually rethinks and reshapes itself to both adapt and develop in opposition to this changing American culture. Therefore, in assuming that Hoodoo culture retains a sort of African essentialism in the face of urban and economic development, scholars like Anderson reduce religions such as Hoodoo to fixed, unchanging religious entities and continue to uphold the same Eurocentric conceptions of African-American ahistoricity that have continually repressed notions of a modern African-American religiosity and, subsequently, denied African-American people the agency to create their own, fluid, religious perception.

Additionally, African-American communities across the United States "still tell of Hoodoo's efficacy [and] the[se] potential believers still seek help from a tradition now forced to the margins of black culture . . ." (Hazzard-Donald 2013, p. 162). This belief in the efficacy of Hoodoo has evolved as a direct result of the perception of ritual objects like Mojo Bags, wherein the practitioner, and not the society at large, determines the worth of the ritual objects within it and, in turn, allows the sacred nature of the contents to imbue power into the self. Within the practice of "conjure," essentialist concerns for historically determined "authenticity" or "purity" of religious practice or belief are far from the minds of practitioners as "the users of spiritual products have transferred to these manufactured goods their belief in the properties of traditional charms, rendered magical because they are composed of symbolic ingredients and activated by symbolic rituals" (Long 2001, p. 104).

Like Douglass, whose belief in the magic of the root he was given was contingent on its success in both empowering him and calming his master Mr. Covey, African-American Hoodoo practitioners continue to build and sustain their own conceptions of Hoodoo based on *personal and individual experience* rather than on institutionalized and often formerly or currently oppressive religious doctrine. The maintenance of individualized conceptions of Hoodoo continually arise as a consequence of the involvement of the practitioners themselves in constructing an individual standard of religious practice as, "in [their] epistemic acts . . . [they] do not passively register being on an internal screen, but rather participate in the dynamic elevation, transformation, and fulfillment of both the knower and the known through the inauguration of a new relationship" (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, p. 18). Essentially, these practitioners cannot be said to have "lost" but instead "adapted" Hoodoo to fit a more normative and business-oriented model of modernity inherited by the European and American influences they have historically incorporated into their belief system.

## 5. Conclusions

Since the importation of African slaves to America began in the 17th century, African-American populations in the United States have worked continually to undermine the oppressive system of institutionalized enslavement and, later, racism that sought to dehumanize them. Hoodoo, emerging in the 18th century out of the amalgamation of influences in peripheral communities in the United States, provided these African and African-American slaves with at least some of sense of the empowerment they were looking for. Through the use of ritual objects such as Mojo Bags, slaves like Frederick Douglass were able to assume a perceived sacred power, allowing them to resist, and in Douglass' case, both control and fight with their enslavers and oppressors. Consequently, as Hoodoo continued its development in the United States, this legacy of "ingroup" power and support seemed to disappear, as the "commodification" of Hoodoo seemed to distort its "authenticity." Despite this claim by scholars that Hoodoo has been wholly "commodified," a number of African-American people across the American South and beyond continue to embrace this process of "commodifying" in order to profit from the ritual "magick" that had helped their ancestors establish an individual sense of agency. In so doing, these practitioners retain hope in the future of this belief system, choosing to uphold their individualized interpretations of the sacred over scholarly predictions regarding the demise of Hoodoo.

Despite this modicum of hope retained by its practitioners, conflicting accounts of the "commodification" of Hoodoo practice seem to indicate that the future of this individualized religion

remains somewhat tenuous. In recent decades, due to the continued association of Hoodoo ritual culture with “magic,” the practice of Hoodoo has become something of a novelty to primarily white, non-practicing consumers (Anderson 2007, p. 136). For Hoodoo practitioners looking to sell their goods, it has therefore become more profitable to rely “on stereotypes of . . . [H]oodoo to attract their primarily white clientele” (ibid.) than to promote the sale of historically accurate ritual objects that appeal to modern, African-American practitioners of Hoodoo. Additionally, white shop owners seem to dominate the mainstream Hoodoo market, undermining the ability of African-American people to rely on their religious beliefs to assure their economic empowerment.<sup>5</sup> As Hoodoo continues its movement into mainstream white culture, it seems as though this belief system seems destined to lose, not only its connection to African-American culture, but also its peripheral consciousness. For practitioners of Hoodoo, however, this peripheral religion maintains an overwhelming effect on their individualized identity. Subsequently, despite the great deal of scholarly attention directed towards its demise, sincere practitioners of this belief system continue to retain their perception that Hoodoo remains a powerful legacy within the religious discourse on the periphery today, a legacy that can still empower those individuals that choose to affirm its “work”-ability.

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Jeffrey Anderson, 17 November 2016.

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