

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Chapter **1**

Seeing the Breadth and Depth of Hoodoo

When some people hear the term *Hoodoo*, they picture Hollywood stereotypes: dolls stuck with pins, curses muttered in darkness, and scary voodoo magic. But what's the reality? Hoodoo is sophisticated spiritual technology developed by enslaved Africans and their descendants; it's a tradition of healing, protection, empowerment, and justice that's been practiced for more than four centuries in America.

This chapter gives you the big picture of the Hoodoo tradition. You can find out what Hoodoo is, where it came from, how it works, and, most importantly, how to approach this living tradition with understanding and respect. Think of this chapter as your orientation to a rich, complex world that African Americans have inhabited for generations.

Recognizing the Roots of Hoodoo

Hoodoo is a practical African American spiritual tradition focused on solving real-world problems through work with roots, herbs, prayers, spirits, and resourcefulness. The traditional practices developed in the American South when the enslaved Africans from multiple ethnic groups synthesized their various spiritual systems into something new. They took West African spirit work, Central African conjure bundles, and Islamic prayer traditions and fused them with materials and knowledge found in America. The tradition also draws on Jewish and Christian prayers, Native American herbs, and European folk magic.

The result of this combining and infusing became a distinctly African American practice built for survival and resistance under brutal conditions. Other names for Hoodoo practice that you may encounter include *rootwork* (which emphasizes the aspect of herbal and botanical knowledge), *conjure* (which emphasizes spiritual work), and simply the *Work* (which is what some Hoodoo insiders call it).

Knowing what Hoodoo isn't

Hoodoo can be confused with a lot of other things. Following are a few examples of other religions, practices, and traits that are distinct from Hoodoo but may be linked in people's minds:

- » **Voodoo (Haitian Vodou).** Both Hoodoo and Voodoo descended from African spiritual systems, but they developed separately. *Voodoo, or Vodou*, is an organized religion with temples, priesthood, and specific spirits (for example, *lwa*, intermediary spiritual messengers or deities). Hoodoo is decentralized folk practice without formal clergy. In New Orleans, these two traditions met and blended into Louisiana Voodoo, but elsewhere they remained distinct.
- » **Santería.** *Santería* (also called Lukúmi) is a Cuban religion preserving Yoruba traditions with elaborate initiations and worship of Orisha (divine spirits or deities). Hoodoo shares African roots with Santería but developed differently. It's less formally organized, more thoroughly Christianized, and shaped by North American rather than Caribbean circumstances.
- » **Generic witchcraft.** European witchcraft traditions come from their own cultural contexts. Hoodoo comes from African spiritual systems filtered through the Black American experience. The techniques, the spirits, and the cultural logic are all distinctly African American.

» **Evil, malevolent, or devil worship.** This unfortunate — and completely wrong — stereotype comes from white supremacist fear-mongering and the Christian demonization of African practices. Historical Hoodoo practitioners were often deeply devout Christians who used the Bible as their primary working text. The tradition's origin is fundamentally about protection, healing, and justice.

Exploring the African trunk

Before addressing what Hoodoo absorbed from other cultures, I want to describe the origins that started it. Hoodoo's foundation is African. Specifically, it's West and Central African spiritual systems that enslaved people carried across the Middle Passage. (See Chapter 7 for information about the Middle Passage as part of the journey from Africa.)

Multiple West African ethnic groups contributed. Yoruba people brought understanding of *Orisha* (divine spirits governing natural forces) and the spiritual potency of iron and crossroads. The Fon and Ewe peoples contributed reverence for water spirits and the understanding of rivers and crossroads as spiritually charged places. Mandinka and Bambara peoples brought *gris-gris*, protective charm-sacks filled with herbs, minerals, and prayers, which became Hoodoo's *mojo* bags. Many of these West African Muslims also demonstrated that written sacred words carry spiritual power, preparing the way for Psalm magic.

If West Africa provided Hoodoo's cosmology, Central Africa — especially the Bakongo people of Congo and Angola — provided its material technology. Over 40 percent of enslaved Africans brought to North America came from this region. Their *minkisi* (spirit-filled bundles made for specific purposes) are direct ancestors of every Hoodoo conjure bag, bottle spell, and buried charm. The Kongo *Cosmogram* (explained in Chapter 2), a cross within a circle representing the boundary between living and dead, shaped Hoodoo's understanding of crossroads as power centers where worlds meet.



REMEMBER

What enslaved Africans could not carry in their hands, they carried in their memory. When everything else was stripped away, including languages, names, families, and freedom, they held onto their traditional practices because they worked.

Recognizing a multicultural synthesis

Hoodoo didn't develop in isolation. Enslaved Africans encountered other cultures, and each encounter left its traces on the development of the Hoodoo tradition.

Native American influences

Native Americans shared botanical knowledge that proved essential, although the relationship was complicated. Some Native peoples sheltered escaped enslaved Africans and exchanged knowledge freely; others participated in the slave trade. Practitioners learned which North American plants carried the properties they needed through whatever contact was available. Native American peoples' influence came from their proximity to plantations, through trade, and by genuine alliance in maroon communities (see Chapter 12) where escaped enslaved people and Native peoples lived and built together.

The Hoodoo practitioners used the local tobacco for offerings, cedar for cleansing, and sassafras for money work. The spiritual framework for how to use these resources remained African; what changed was the *pharmacopoeia*, or the documented formulas.

European impact

European influence came primarily through Christianity, and it came by force. But what was imposed on the Africans became weaponized. The enslaved people took the Bible and turned it into a working text, with the following uses:

- » Psalm 23 for protection from overseers and oppressive living conditions
- » Psalm 35 for justice against enemies
- » Psalm 91 for strong cover during dangerous work or spiritual battle

Similarly, European grimoires (magic manuals) like *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* circulated through 19th-century mail-order catalogs, and Hoodoo practitioners took what was useful from the grimoires and discarded the rest. They might *pull a seal* (copy a specific symbol from a grimoire) that worked and tuck it into a mojo bag with High John root rather than perform the elaborate ritual the European text prescribed.

Hebrew mystical elements

The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses title alone signals a deeper thread because the text is steeped in Jewish Kabbalistic tradition. This tradition is part of a broader Hebrew mystical current whose reverence for sacred names, written text as power, and practical spiritual work found natural resonance in Hoodoo's own understanding of the written word as living force. The Jewish thread in Hoodoo runs deeper than most people realize; Chapter 3 explores it further.

The resulting combination

The genius isn't in any single element borrowed from another culture or tradition. It's in the synthesis: Hoodoo grabbed whatever was useful from any available source and transformed it on African terms, for African American purposes, into something that's 100 percent African American regardless of what else was mixed in.



TECHNICAL
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The multicultural nature of Hoodoo sometimes is used to argue that it belongs to everyone. This interpretation misunderstands the purpose of Hoodoo's synthesis. American jazz draws on African rhythms, European harmonics, and blues traditions, but no one argues that jazz isn't a Black American art form. Hoodoo's multicultural influences don't dilute its African American identity; they demonstrate its creative genius.

Establishing Hoodoo as Science and Magic

At its heart, Hoodoo answers one question: How do I handle this situation or circumstance I'm faced with when official channels don't work or were designed to work against me?

The situation might be an abusive boss threatening your livelihood, a sickness that medicine can't cure, a legal case where the system is rigged, a love that needs working (a romantic situation requiring a spell or rootwork ritual to bring it to the desired outcome), or a child who needs protecting. Hoodoo developed as practical problem-solving for people with limited resources facing enormous challenges.



REMEMBER

Enslaved people couldn't call the police because the police were their oppressors. They couldn't sue in court because they weren't legally recognized as human. They couldn't openly organize or resist. But they could work roots. They could pray. They could call on ancestors. They could make protective charms, heal with herbs, and divine the future.

This practical, results-focused nature remains Hoodoo's defining characteristic. You didn't come to Hoodoo seeking enlightenment or cosmic mystery. You came because your rent is due, your child is sick, or someone is trying to harm you, and you need results. Survival and protection may address different situations for today's practitioners, but practicality of purpose is Hoodoo's origin and deserves to be remembered.

Hoodoo also refuses to separate the material from the spiritual. Herbs have both chemical properties and spiritual properties, not as two different realities, but as

two aspects of the same one. Prayer isn't just psychological comfort; practitioners expect it to produce measurable outcomes. This integration of science and spirit isn't a contradiction; it's the tradition's distinctive epistemology, forged under conditions where people couldn't afford to keep those realms separated.

Getting the Right Mindset

What often confuses newcomers to the practice is that Hoodoo has no central authority, no official doctrine, and no standardized practices. Ask 10 rootworkers how to work a particular root, and you'll get 12 different answers. The results are similar if you ask how to make collard greens or other traditional African American dishes. This decentralization is both the tradition's greatest strength and its most persistent challenge. Consider this:

- » **Decentralization is a strength because it enables survival.** You can't destroy Hoodoo by raiding a temple or killing a high priest because Hoodoo has no temples or hierarchies. The knowledge lives in thousands of families, passed through generations, hidden in plain sight. Without fixed dogma, practitioners could innovate and adapt. When traditional African herbs weren't available, they substituted American plants; when new materials became accessible, they incorporated them.
- » **Decentralization is a challenge because it means no consensus.** Terms aren't standardized. For example, a mojo bag (see Chapter 5) is also called a gris-gris, a hand, a trick, and a conjure bag. Quality of roots and magical items varies widely. Debates about authenticity and who has the right to practice continue without resolution. And because no central authority exists to settle them, the debates about the tradition will persist.



REMEMBER

Hoodoo's lack of central structure isn't a flaw waiting to be fixed. It's the architecture that kept the tradition alive for four centuries under conditions designed to destroy it.

The book that you're holding is a map, not the territory. It provides the foundational understanding — history, principles, techniques, and cultural context — you need to engage with Hoodoo wisely. It helps you recognize authentic practitioners, distinguish the tradition from its Hollywood distortions, and approach living communities with respect. What this book can't do is replace elders, community, or direct spiritual relationship. Those can't be delivered in print.



The Appendix covers red flags for identifying fraudulent practitioners and guidance for finding legitimate teachers. If you're planning to seek out a rootworker or begin a practice, read that material before you engage.

Understanding How Hoodoo Is Practiced

Hoodoo encompasses four main areas of practice. Understanding these helps you recognize what practitioners are doing and why. These four domains interweave constantly, and a typical working might combine all of them at once:

- » **Changemaking (Fixin' or Workin')** is what most people associate with magic, the practical work to alter circumstances. In Hoodoo, you can make a *mojo bag* to attract money, burn candles to open roads and remove obstacles, use *foot track magic* (working roots or powders into the ground where a target will walk, so the magic enters through the feet) to influence someone's behavior, and create *bottle spells* (workings placed inside a sealed bottle or jar) to either trap and confine or sweeten, bind, or protect. Honey jars are the most familiar contemporary form of bottle spells.
- » **Divination** involves reading signs and understanding what's coming or is unseen and in play, as you can read in Chapter 8. Methods for divination include using standard playing cards, tarot, bones, dream interpretation, and *bibliomancy*, which means letting the Bible fall open to reveal answers. Some practitioners are *two-headed* — gifted seers who perceive both the material and the immaterial dimensions of a situation simultaneously.
- » **Personal power development**, as I describe in Chapter 10, involves practitioners building their spiritual strength and authority through regular spiritual baths and cleansings, cultivating discernment, and maintaining spiritual hygiene. The goal is to keep yourself clear of influences that would compromise your work.
- » **Spirit work** is the foundation that supports everything else. You can read about it in Chapter 7. Honoring ancestors, maintaining relationship with spiritual forces, making offerings, and learning to receive guidance from the dead are all part of spirit work.

Reaching the Heart of Hoodoo

If one practice defines Hoodoo more than any other, it's spirit work, particularly ancestor veneration. Everything else in the tradition ultimately serves this relationship between the living and the dead, the material and the immaterial.

In African cosmology, which Hoodoo maintains, death isn't an end. The dead become *ancestors*: guides and guardians that have powers and remain actively involved in the living world. When enslaved Africans lost everything — freedom, family, homeland, and language — they didn't lose their dead. Ancestors couldn't be sold away or beaten into submission. That bond persisted across the Middle Passage and through every generation of oppression.

Modern Hoodoo practitioners may pour libations, leave food offerings at graves and ancestor altars, petition ancestors for help with specific problems, use graveyard dirt to carry ancestral power, and speak to the dead regularly, not metaphorically, but as actual presences who can and do intervene in material reality.

Hoodoo without spirit work is just herbalism. A practitioner can memorize every root correspondence, mix perfect oils, and burn candles in the correct colors. But if they're not honoring ancestors and maintaining right relationship with the spirit world, they're not practicing Hoodoo. Practitioners consistently express a version of the same wisdom: Spirit connection isn't optional. It's what makes the work *work*.



REMEMBER

Honoring ancestors and worshiping ancestors aren't the same thing. Hoodoo venerates ancestors — shows respect, maintains relationship, and asks for help — without elevating them to divine status. This distinction matters especially for Christian practitioners who worry about idolatry. Chapter 7 explores this in depth.

Knowing Hoodoo's Place in Society

Hoodoo is accessible by design. The tradition carried no priestly gatekeeping, and its benefits extended beyond the community. Even outsiders sought out root-workers for healing, protection, and counsel. That democratic accessibility was both practical necessity and spiritual principle. The tradition existed to serve people's actual needs, not to restrict who could receive the service. Whether that same openness extends to deciding who may practice Hoodoo — rather than who may seek help — remains a lively and unresolved conversation within contemporary Hoodoo communities (see Chapter 2 for more about this conversation).

This focus on serving actual needs hasn't changed. The 21st century has brought a renaissance led primarily by African American women — publicly reclaiming traditions that white supremacy and patriarchal forces tried to erase, and sharing knowledge through books, workshops, and online communities. Information that was once passed along in whispers is increasingly visible. That visibility brings

debates about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and who has the right to practice Hoodoo. The tradition's decentralized nature means those debates will never have a single authoritative answer. (See the section “Getting the Right Mindset” earlier in the chapter.)



TIP

Without a central authority, the development of the Hoodoo tradition helps clarify the debate about who should practice and how. Hoodoo emerged from African American life, was preserved through African American determination, and continues to serve African American communities. That's Hoodoo's home, its center of gravity, and the context without which you can't properly understand it. The ancestors preserved Hoodoo practices across four centuries of sustained effort to erase them. This book is your guide to understanding what they preserved and why it still matters.

