Hoodoo / Conjure in the Words of Enslaved People (Antebellum South)

Introduction to the Primary Sources

You're about to read firsthand accounts in which enslaved African Americans describe hoodoo/rootwork—protective charms, roots and powders, "conjure bags," counter-sorcery, and related practices used for healing, protection, love, and justice within slave communities. Two of the selections come from antebellum slave narratives by Frederick Douglass (1845) and Henry Bibb (1849)—autobiographies published to persuade Northern readers about slavery's realities. The other selections are Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews recorded in the 1930s and later compiled by the Library of Congress as *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States*. These interviews preserve memories passed down from the slavery era and are available in open, public-domain editions (e.g., Library of Congress, Project Gutenberg, Internet Archive).

As you read, look for explicit references to roots, charms, powders, amulets, "conjure doctors," and counter-tricks (ways people tried to undo harmful magic). Notice how beliefs vary by region and speaker, and how hoodoo sometimes coexisted with, or conflicted with, Christian practice.

Note on Reading These Sources

These texts come to us in different forms—some are autobiographies written for abolitionist audiences in the 1840s, others are oral histories recorded by WPA interviewers in the 1930s. That means each has been shaped by its genre and by the people who wrote or recorded it. Thinking about who the audience was, who did the writing or transcribing, and how much time passed between the events and the recording helps us understand both what the sources can tell us and what might have been emphasized, forgotten, or altered.

Note on Language & Transcription

*These excerpts are presented as primary sources and appear **as they were originally recorded or published**. Several were taken down in the 1800s or during the 1930s WPA interviews, where fieldworkers often **transcribed speech phonetically** (to represent how people sounded) and sometimes edited for dialect. As a result, you will encounter **non-standard spellings, grammatical forms, and words or descriptions that are racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive today**. We have **not altered** this language, because changing it would distort the historical record and the speakers' voices.*

*Please approach these texts with care and respect. Our goal is to **analyze** how language, power, and belief operated under slavery—not to reproduce harm. In discussion or when reading aloud, you may choose to **reference slurs indirectly** (e.g., "the N-word") while keeping the written text unchanged in your notes/citations. Be mindful that dialect spellings reflect **how collectors chose to write what they heard**, not the intelligence or worth of the speakers.*

Source 1: Frederick Douglass — Sandy Jenkins's protective root (Maryland, 1833–34)

Context:

Frederick Douglass recounts events in 1833–34 while hired out to Edward Covey in St. Michael's, Maryland. After a severe beating, Douglass encounters Sandy Jenkins, an older enslaved man who proposes a specific counter-sorcery remedy drawn from African American rootwork. Sandy instructs Douglass to carry a particular root on his right side to prevent any white man from whipping him. Douglass records the practice carefully but skeptically, noting both its social currency among enslaved people and his own doubts.

Quotation(s):

"I found Sandy an old adviser. He told me, with great solemnity, 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. He said he had carried it for years; and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to while he carried it. I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could do no harm, if it did no good."

Source 2: Henry Bibb — powders, roots, 'love powder,' and failed love-conjure (Kentucky)

Context:

While enslaved in Kentucky, Henry Bibb describes seeking out conjurers to avoid punishment and to influence affection. In one episode, after fearing a flogging for leaving without permission, he pays a conjurer who prescribes powders (alum, salt, and other ingredients) to sprinkle near his master and a bitter root to chew and spit toward him; Bibb first thinks it works, then recounts being whipped "in spite of all my roots and powders." He subsequently tries a second practitioner's recipe—scorching cow manure with red pepper and white people's hair, grinding it into snuff to scatter in the master's bedroom as a 'love powder'—but judges it a failure. Bibb also details two 'love-conjure' techniques to compel a woman's affection: scratching skin with a dried bull-frog bone and secretly wearing a lock of her hair in his shoe; both attempts backfire. Together these passages provide rare first-person descriptions of specific ingredients and procedures used (or believed in) by enslaved people for protection and for love/influence, as well as a reflective critique by Bibb himself.

Quotation(s):

Protection conjure (powders/roots):

> "There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call 'conjuration,' tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art, and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves. Such are often applied to by others, to give them power to prevent their masters from flogging them. The remedy is most generally some kind of bitter root; they are directed to chew it and spit towards their masters when they are angry with their slaves. At other times they prepare certain kinds of powders, to sprinkle about their masters dwellings. This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some peaceable manner, although I am satisfied that there is no virtue at all in it. I have tried it to perfection when I was a slave at the South. … He said if I would pay him a small sum, he would prevent my being flogged. After I had paid him, he mixed up some alum, salt and other stuff into a powder, and said I must sprinkle it about my master, if he should offer to strike me; this would prevent him. He also gave me some kind of bitter root to chew, and spit towards him, which would certainly prevent my being flogged. According to order I used his remedy, and for some cause I was let pass without being flogged that time. … But he soon convinced me that there was no virtue in them. … [He] punished me severely, in spite of all my roots and powders."

'Love powder' to soften anger:

> "After I had paid him his charge, he told me to go to the cow-pen after night, and get some fresh cow manure, and mix it with red pepper and white people's hair, all to be put into a pot over the fire, and scorched until it could be ground into snuff. I was then to sprinkle it about my master's bed-room, in his hat and boots, and it would prevent

him from ever abusing me in any way. … This was to act upon them as what is called a kind of love powder, to change their sentiments of anger, to those of love, towards me, but this all proved to be vain imagination."

Failed love-conjure (frog-bone & hair):

"One of these conjurers, for a small sum agreed to teach me to make any girl love me that I wished. After I had paid him, he told me to get a bull frog, and take a certain bone out of the frog, dry it, and when I got a chance I must step up to any girl whom I wished to make love me, and scratch her somewhere on her naked skin with this bone, and she would be certain to love me, and would follow me in spite of herself; no matter who she might be engaged to, nor who she might be walking with. … But in place of making her love me, it only made her angry with me. … Another counsellor … told me to get a lock of hair from the head of any girl, and wear it in my shoes: this would cause her to love me above all other persons. … I grasped hold of a lock of her hair … but I never let go until I had pulled it out. This of course made the girl mad with me, and I accomplished nothing but gained her displeasure."

Source 3: Celestia Avery — Conjure tricks and anti-conjure protections (Georgia WPA)

Context:

Interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia, Celestia Avery gives detailed examples of conjure practice and anti-conjure protections remembered from slavery-time communities. She tells of a 'conjurer' who staged the 'discovery' of a planted 'ground puppy' (a horned worm) after burying it himself, revealing how some practitioners defrauded clients. She then lists household countermeasures to prevent being 'fixed'—sprinkling chamber-lye mixed with salt around the doorway and wearing a silver dime on the leg—evidence of everyday protective knowledge and practice.

Quotation(s):

"I had a cousin named Alec Heard, and he had a wife named Anna Heard. Anna stayed sick all der time almost; fer two years she complained. One day a old conjurer came to der house and told Alec that Anna wuz poisoned, but if he would give him $5.00 he would come back Sunday morning and find the conjure. Alec wuz wise, so he bored a hole in the kitchen floor so that he could jest peep through there to der back steps. Sho nuff Sunday morning the nigger come back and as Alec watched him he dug down in the gound a piece, then he took a ground puppy, threw it in the hole and covered it up. All right, he started digging again and all at onct he jumped up and cried: 'Here 'tis! I got it.' … Alec wuz so mad he jumped on that man and beat him most to death.'

'One thing I do every morning is ter sprinkle chamber-lye (urine) with salt and then throw it all around my door. They sho can't fix you if you do this. Anudder thing, if you wear a silver dime around your leg they can't fix you. The 'oman live next door says she done wore two silver dimes around her leg for 18 years.'"

Source 4: Willis Easter — ‘Cunjure’ harms and a carried ‘jack’ (Texas WPA)

Context:
Willis Easter, interviewed in Texas, describes both harmful ‘cunjure’ and protective practices he and his family used. He lists ingredients associated with hoodoo (hair, fingernails, dried insects and ‘bat wings’), gives a sung anti-hoodoo verse, and explains that he carries a ‘jack’—a red-flannel-wrapped charm prepared by an expert—to defend himself. The account shows how belief in cunjure coexisted with routine amulet use for protection.

Quotation(s):
“I never studied cunjurin’, but I knows dat scorripins and things dey cunjures with am powerful medicine. Dey uses hair and fingernails and tacks and dry insects and worms and bat wings and sech. Mammy allus tie a leather string round de babies’ necks when dey teethin’, to make dem have easy time. She used a dry frog or piece nutmeg, too.

Mammy allus tell me to keep from bein’ cunjure, I sing:
‘Keep ’way from me, hoodoo and witch, … If you don’t watch out, he’ll cunjure you.’

Dem cunjuremen sho’ bad. Dey make you have pneumony and boils and bad luck. I carries me a jack all de time. It em de charm wrop in red flannel. Don’t know what am in it. A bossman, he fix it for me.”

Source 5: Sallie L. Keenan — Breaking a 'Trick': conjure rivalry and a grapevine cure (South Carolina WPA, 1937)

Context:

Sallie Layton Keenan, about 80 years old, was interviewed at 20 Calhoun Street, Union, South Carolina, by Caldwell Sims in 1937. In her narrative she recounts her parents' enslavement under the Wallace family and a forced migration westward; her mother and father ('Obie') travelled by wagon and carriage from South Carolina to "Promoter" (likely DeSoto County) Mississippi and later returned by rail to Union. Amid this family history, Keenan describes a direct case of conjure rivalry surrounding courtship. A man who wanted her mother allegedly "put a spell on" her father by dropping a conjure bag into the spring from which he drank; her father was then stricken with debilitating rheumatism, bedridden for six weeks, and "dey all knowed dat he wuz conjured." Her father's brother sought out a counter-conjurer who specified a concrete anti-conjure procedure keyed to the very spring the rival had targeted: cut a six-foot length of grapevine growing over the spring at night, bring it to the conjure doctor to be secretly "worked," then keep it by the bed. When the suspected rival next visited, Keenan reports, her father was to rise on his left elbow and strike the man across the face and head with the grapevine; doing so would break the spell, allowing him to get up from his sickbed. Keenan concludes that the remedy succeeded and that her father "nebber did have no mo' rheumatiz." The episode records, in dialect, a full sequence of perceived attack (a planted conjure bag in a water source) and counter-sorcery (a grapevine prepared by a conjure doctor, then used in a single decisive blow) within an enslaved community in South Carolina.

Quotation(s):

"When my paw, 'Obie', wuz a courtin, a nigger put a spell on him kaise he was a wantin' my maw too. De nigger got a conjure bag and drapped it in de spring what my paw drunk water from. He wuz laid up on a bed o' rheumatiz fer six weeks. Dey all knowed dat he wuz conjured. … So his brother knowed who had put de spell on him. He tuck and went to another old conjure man and axed him to take dat spell off'n paw. De conjure man 'lowed to paw's brother dat a grapevine growed over de spring, and fer him to go dar and cut a piece of it six feet long and fetch it to his house at night. When he tuck it to de conjure man's house, de conjure man, he took de vine in a dark place and done somethin to it—de Lawd knows what. Den he tole my paw's brother to take it home and give it to paw. … Our conjure man, he tole paw dat de nex time de man come an' set down by his bed, fer him to raise up on his lef elbow and rech down by his bed and take dat piece o' grapevine and hit de nigger over de head and face. Den atter he had done dat, our conjure man 'lowed dat paw could den rise up from his bed o' rheumatiz. … Jus as he 'lowed dat, paw, he riz up on his lef shoulder and elbow and wid his right han' he let loose and come down over dat nigger's face and forehead wid dat grapevine. … My paw got up de next day and dey 'lows dat he nebber did have no mo' rheumatiz."