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CONJURE, MAGIC, AND POWER

The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion

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Writing in 1842, Reverend Charles C. Jones (1969) exposed the fears many antebellum southerners had regarding the influence of what he called “teachers, doctors, prophets, conjurers” in determining the actions of North American slaves:

Ignorance and superstition render them easy dupes to . . . artful and designing men On certain occasions they have been made to believe that while they carried about their persons some charm with which they had been furnished, they were *invulnerable*. They have, on certain other occasions, been made to believe that they were under a protection that rendered them *invincible* They have been known to be so perfectly and fearfully under the influence of some leader or conjurer or minister, that they have not dared disobey him in the least particular. (p. 128)

These “artful and designing men” and women found on plantations throughout the Americas were as ubiquitous as the individual and group acts of slave resistance they inspired. They served as conduits of powerful supernatural forces beyond the comprehension of their contemporaries and were, therefore, believed to be integral to the success of a number of slave resistance movements. The mystical powers conjurers claimed to control made them formidable and respected figures among enslaved Africans. As historian John Blassingame (1972) noted, “In many instances, the conjurer had more control over the slaves than the master had” (p. 110).

The fear evoked by these spiritualists is readily measured by the words and actions of slaves and their holders. Henry Clay Bruce (1969), a man who spent 29 years of his life as a slave in Missouri, Virginia, and Mississippi, recalled numerous "conjurers, who succeeded in duping their fellow-slaves so successfully, and to such an extent that they believed and feared them almost beyond their masters" (p. 52). Among slaves at least, conjurers were respected not solely because of the apprehension their powers inspired. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois (1982), these spiritualists had multifaceted and multidimensional functions in the slave community; at any given time, the conjurer could be "the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of the wrong" (p. 216). It would be through many of these roles that African conjurers helped to encourage slave resistance throughout the Americas.

In North America, the power of conjure was revered by both African- and American-born slave rebels in similar fashion. They seemingly believed, without question, the ability of these spiritualists to determine the outcome of a variety of events, including resistance movements, through arcane and supernatural means. This assessment runs counter to the claims of Eugene Genovese (1976) who argued that the presence of West Indian conjurers as insurrectionary leaders "could not be reproduced in the United States, except on a trivial scale, because the necessary revolutionary conjuncture did not exist. The conjurers of the Old South were accommodationists in the same sense as were the black preachers" (p. 222). Despite a general tendency by Genovese and other American historians to view the North American slave experience as unique or exceptional, the widespread belief and practice of conjuration proves that this particular phenomenon at least was a shared African diasporic reality. Indeed, sufficient evidence demonstrating that slave conjurers in North America were in fact an influencing presence in a number of mass rebellions, conspiracies, and acts of day-to-day resistance can be found in a variety of primary sources. Far from being the "accommodationists" discussed by Genovese, North American conjurers can be better viewed as a rev-

olutionary vanguard inspiring and encouraging resistive behavior among their fellow slaves.

AFRICAN CONJURERS IN SLAVE REBELLIONS

Claiming command over esoteric and magical forces, conjurers were seen as integral to the success of slave revolts. This was definitely the case in the 1712 New York City slave rebellion, which was the most serious slave disturbance up to that time in the British American colonies. It only involved about 28 insurgents; however, this relatively small band killed 10 Whites, wounded 12 others, and created a panic throughout the North American colonies (Aptheker, 1993, p. 173; Carroll, 1938, pp. 14-15). Among the key components in this rebellion was Peter the Doctor, a free African conjurer who rubbed a magical powder onto the clothing of the slaves to reportedly make them invulnerable. Thus emboldened, the rebels armed with swords, knives, and guns set fire to a building in downtown New York City and waited to ambush approaching Whites seeking to put out the blaze (Aptheker, 1993, p. 172; Sharpe, 1890, pp. 162-163).

This New York City revolt had some revealing parallels with an uprising that took place in 1760 on another British colonial possession, Jamaica (Higginson, 1969, pp. 7-8). A slave named Tacky, who was claimed to be Koromantyn,¹ led a slave rebellion in Jamaica with the aid of a number of Obeah conjurers. As a spiritual practice linked to Akan-speaking West Africans from the Gold Coast region, Obeah was a powerful belief system found particularly among slaves in the British, Danish, and Dutch Caribbean, and mainland South American colonies. During the early phases of this revolt, one of Tacky's Obeah-men was captured by colonial officials, allowing a window into the world of this unique practice, while at the same time, creating a plausible explanation for the events occurring during the New York City rebellion nearly 50 years earlier (Morrish, 1982, pp. 23, 41; Schuler, 1970b, p. 375).

According to a contemporary source, this captured conjurer was also Coromantin or Akan-speaking. After being apprehended by

British colonial authorities, this Obeah-man testified that he, along with his fellow practitioners, “administered a powder, which being rubbed on their bodies, was to make them invulnerable” (Schuler, 1970b, p. 375). Thus, in both the 1712 New York City revolt and the 1760 Jamaican conspiracy, powder was rubbed onto slaves imbuing them with special powers and giving them the confidence to rebel.

A definite Akan-speaking presence can be found in the 1712 New York City revolt. Two of the three extant contemporary accounts of the uprising demonstrate tangible proof that Akan-speaking Africans played active roles in this event. The April 7th to 14th, 1712 edition of the *Boston News-Letter*, which at the time was the only newspaper operating in British North America, reported that “some *Cormentine* Negroes to the number of 25 or 30 and 2 or 3 Spanish Indians . . . conspired to murder all the Christians here” (*Boston News-Letter*, 1712). In a letter dated June 23, 1712, Reverend John Sharpe, chaplain of the English garrison in New York City, revealed even more information linking these events to Akan-speaking Africans. Sharpe reported that “some Negro Slaves here of ye Nations of *Caramantee* & Pappa plotted to destroy all the White[s] in order to obtain their freedom” (Sharpe, 1890, pp. 162-163).

Not only were the rebels referred to in two of the contemporary accounts as *Kormantine*—a term associated with Akan-speakers from the Gold Coast—but another important indicator of an Akan presence is readily evident in the trial records generated in the aftermath of the 1712 revolt. Of the 21 Africans facing criminal charges in connection with the uprising, 9 had Akan day names. Of the slaves accused of being involved in the revolt, 2 were named Cuffee, 4 were named Quacko, 1 was named Quashi, Quasi, and Amba, respectively (Scott, 1961, pp. 63-65). With few exceptions, every Akan child is given a first name determined by the actual day of his or her birth, in addition to any other familial names (see Table 1). On reaching adulthood, the original day name was typically no longer commonly used, except by close relatives and others wishing to express familiarity and endearment. This practice in the Americas is a testament to particular African cultural under-

TABLE 1
Akan Day Names in the Gold Coast and the Americas

<i>Day of the Week</i>	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>	
	<i>Gold Coast</i>	<i>Americas</i>	<i>Gold Coast</i>	<i>Americas</i>
Sunday	Kwesi	Quash, Quashy	Esi, Akwesi	Quashiba
Monday	Kwado	Cudjo	Adwowa	Juba
Tuesday	Kwabena	Cubena	Abena, Abenaba	Benni
Wednesday	Kweku	Quaco	Ekuwa	Cuba
Thursday	Kwaw, Kwaa	Quao, Quaw	Aba	Abba
Friday	Kwefi	Cuffy, Cuffee	Efiwa	Pheba
Saturday	Kwamena	Quamina, Quamino, Quamine	Amba, Amma	Amba

standings which continued to shape the consciousness of 18th-century North American slaves (Anim, 1991, pp. 2-3; Schuler, 1970a, p. 29).

In addition to the nine rebels with obvious Akan day names, a young male slave by the name of Dick, owned by Harmanus Burger, performed a vital function during the course of the trials. Having been charged in the coroner's inquest with the murder of Henry Brasier on April 9, 1712, Dick along with Peter Vantilborough's Cuffee received immunity in return for services provided to the British Crown. Serving as an interpreter for the slaves who could not speak English—on several dates including April 11th, 12th, 14th, 16th, and 17th; May 7th and 27th; and June 4th—Dick's skills in that regard were drawn on in at least seven of the nine cases involving slaves with Akan day names. Joost Lynsen's Quacko, who was charged on the same day as Dick, and Vantilborough's Cuffee, who also became a witness for the British Crown, were the only Africans with Akan day names not requiring Dick's services in their cases (Scott, 1961, pp. 53, 57, 62-65). Quite obviously, then, Dick too was an Akan-speaking enslaved African.

With so many links to Akan culture in New York City at the time of this uprising, it is entirely conceivable that Peter the Doctor, the

African-born conjurer who inspired the rebellion, was an Akan Obeah-man. Obeah conjurers would later inspire rebellions throughout the British, Dutch, and Danish American colonial possessions, including important revolts in Jamaica in 1733, 1738, and 1760; Antigua in 1736; and Berbice in 1763. No less than 20 rebellions in the Americas were attributed to Akan-speakers in locations including Dutch Guyana, the Virgin Islands, Barbados, and based on the above findings, colonial New York City as well. A sizable number of these Akan slave revolts were intertwined with the practice of Obeah (Curtin, 1955, p. 24; Herskovits & Herskovits, 1934, pp. 350; Higginson, 1969, pp. 7-8; Schuler, 1970a, pp. 9-18).

The word *Obeah* likely derives from the Akan word *Obayifo*, which denotes witchcraft and sorcery in the Akan spiritual universe. The *fo* suffix is added to all proper names in the Akan family of languages. By dropping the suffix, the resulting word is *Obayi*, which was linguistically and phonetically transformed into *Obeah*, *Obia*, and *Obi* throughout the Americas (Gyekye, 1987, pp. 73-75; Hedrick & Stephens, 1977, p. 8; Morrish, 1982, pp. 120-122; Williams, 1932, pp. 120-122). As practiced in the Atlantic world, Obeah often served as an important impetus to slave resistance for a variety of reasons. Like their Gold Coast *Obayifo* counterparts, Obeah conjurers in the Americas used supernatural forces to bring about desired effects and actions. The desired outcome of their incantations and charms could be either positive or negative depending on the specific scenario in which an Obeah-man or Obeah-woman was employed. Similarly, Akan spiritualists and *Obayifo* often employed *aduru*, or any medicine in the form of liquid or powder, in their practice. Based on the expected outcome, *aduru* is categorized as benevolent medicine (*Aduru Pa*), malevolent medicine (*adubone*), or poison (*aduto*). The powders used by both Peter the Doctor in New York City and the Jamaican Obeah doctors would be categorized as *aduru pa* because they were created for the positive outcome of protecting rebellious slaves from evil agents and increasing the likelihood of success in these revolutionary movements. Powders and other forms of benevolent *aduru* function because of the spiritual power they naturally contain. The plants, herbs, human blood, graveyard dirt, and other substances

that constitute the powder all contain an innate amount of supernatural force, which under the proper preparations proved to be quite potent in the hands of Obeah conjurers (Minkus, 1977, pp. 116-117).

Although Obeah served as a powerful inducement to slave resistance in areas with high concentrations of Akan speakers, the Yoruba spiritual system known as Ifá and its various Western hemisphere derivatives—Vodun, Santeria, and Condomblé—would play a similar role in other regions of the Americas. During the initial phases of the 1791 Santo Domingo slave uprising, for example, an individual known as Boukman Dutty, a Vodun high priest, was the initial leader who masterminded the revolutionary movement. Boukman had considerable influence among slaves, serving as both a religious figure and the headman of a plantation. The plan he initiated was on a massive scale, involving hundreds if not thousands of slaves. The insurgents were to set fire to plantations in the outskirts of the province of Le Cap and kill all Whites within the town. On the night of August 22, 1791, the rebels organized in the mountain range adjacent to Le Cap. It was here that Boukman gave final instructions and made Vodun incantations while drinking the blood of a sacrificed pig. Although Boukman was to be captured and executed early in the revolt, his actions gave the necessary momentum and impetus to a movement that culminated in the only successful slave revolt in the history of the Americas (James, 1980, pp. 86-87; Ott, 1973, pp. 47-49; Rodney, 1969, p. 336).

Of the ethnic origins of Boukman, little is known except that he was supposedly a fugitive slave originally from Jamaica. Although Vodun is a religion associated with the Aja-speaking Yoruba, Fon, and Edo peoples of West Africa, based on all available evidence, Boukman was either a Mande speaker or an Akan speaker. Walter Rodney (1969, pp. 336-337) has conjectured that Boukman was possibly a Muslim Mande-speaking Mandinga, an assumption he bases solely on his name. This is because an educated, Muslim Mande speaker in Upper Guinea was often called *Bookman* by English traders in the 18th century, due to that person's education and command of Koranic verse.

If it is true that Boukman was originally from Jamaica, a region that imported an overwhelming majority of Akan speakers from the

Gold Coast during the 18th century, then he might have fit well into a region like Santo Domingo, which was dominated primarily by Aja-speaking Yoruba cultural influences. The Aja-speaking Yoruba originated in a region of West Africa in which both variants of the Kwa language group (including Akan and Aja) were spoken and in which there was a great deal of cultural and commercial contact between the Akan and the Yoruba city-states. With this degree of cultural interplay and diffusion, it is conceivable that an Akan speaker would be well versed in the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Yoruba (Ott, 1973, p. 47; Schuler, 1970b, p. 375; Thornton, 1988, p. 267; 1992, pp. xvi, 253).

If Boukman in fact was an Akan speaker, this would represent a significant phenomenon. Because belief in conjure and magic could be found among most West African peoples, the conjurer in the Americas served as a cultural bridge, with the ability of transcending cultural differences between African groups. As an Akan-speaking Vodun priest, Boukman influenced the actions of Aja-speaking Yoruba, Edo, and Fon as well as the Bantu-speaking Kongolese and Angolans, the principal import populations in the decades leading up to the revolution. The notion among European slave traders and planters that randomizing or mixing African ethnic groups effectively undermined resistance would have been rendered implausible with the presence of such cultural bridges as the conjurer and with the shared belief among many African- and American-born slaves in the power of conjurers to wield supernatural and magical forces (Fouchard, 1979, pp. 283-285; Thornton, 1993, pp. 185-186).

AFRICAN CONJURERS IN SLAVE CONSPIRACIES

Conjurers and other African spiritualists were present in a variety of North American conspiracies and plots, including important examples in New York City in 1741, Richmond in 1800, and Charleston in 1822. In terms of the Charleston, South Carolina, conspiracy initiated by Denmark Vesey, the involvement of three separate conjurers in the planning and the recruiting phases further

demonstrates the notion that conjurers could indeed act as a bridge between Africans from various ethnic backgrounds. The first conjurer, Gullah Jack Pritchard, was perhaps the conspiracy's most important leader next to Vesey. Also known as Cooter Jack, he had a multidimensional role in the conspiracy. Gullah Jack, similar to Peter the Doctor in New York City and the Obeah doctors in the British Caribbean, provided the insurgents with talismans said to render them nearly invincible. In preparation for the rebellion, the combatants had to fast on parched corn and peanuts before receiving a charm from Gullah Jack that consisted of a *cullah*, or crab claw. On the morning of the planned uprising, the rebels were to place the crab claws in their mouths, and this, according to Gullah Jack, would make them invulnerable (Killens, 1970, pp. 76-77).

Gullah Jack was one of the most important recruiters in the conspiracy, due primarily to his influence over fellow slaves. Feared by others because of his abilities, this "little man who can't be killed, shot or taken" was well respected in Charleston and in the surrounding countryside. This fear was reinforced by Jack's threat to injure any informant who betrayed the conspiracy. In fact, even after Jack was captured by local authorities, one slave witness literally begged the court to send him out of state because he considered his life "in great danger from having given testimony." This witness concluded his testimony by stating, "I was afraid of Gullah Jack as a conjurer." Both American- and African-born slaves believed in his powers, and thus, Gullah Jack epitomizes the ability of the conjurer to bridge ethnic differences. Of likely Bantu-speaking Angolan background, Jack held sway over Akan, Igbo, Mande, Gullah, French-speaking Haitian, and English-speaking American-born slaves alike (Killens, 1970, pp. 76-77; Pearson, 1999, pp. 196-197).

One of Gullah Jack's most important recruits was a blacksmith named Tom Russel. According to the testimony of fellow conspirator Henry Haig, when Jack was asked what he would do about weapons, he replied that "he would have some arms made at the blacksmith's shop" (Killens, 1970, p. 79). It would be at Tom's blacksmith shop that six spear-like weapons were crafted and later transported to Gullah Jack in preparation for the rebellion. But Tom Russel was not only a blacksmith and Jack's second-in-command,

he was also an apprentice conjurer. Henry Haig noted, “Tom Russel the Blacksmith and Jack are partners—Jack learned him to be a Doctor. . . . Jack said Tom was his second and when you did not see him, and see Tom, you see [Gullah Jack]” (Killens, 1970, p. 70; Pearson, 1999, p. 196).

A third conjurer played another pivotal role in the planning of this revolt. His name was Philip, and he was described in the trial records as a blind preacher. On one occasion during the initial stages of the conspiracy, Monday Gell and Peter Poyas brought a slave named William Garner to Philip’s house. Monday remarked in his testimony that the blind preacher addressed William and asked him “why he looked so timorous” and quoted a passage from biblical scripture (Killens, 1970, pp. 134, 164-165). William Garner was greatly alarmed by this inquiry, which seemed extraordinary “knowing that the old man was blind” (Killens, 1970, p. 134). However, Philip was not completely without sight. At his birth, a caul covered his face, and according to African folklore, this granted him the ability to foresee events and communicate with the spirit world. In his own testimony, Philip claimed that being born with the caul gave him the gift “of second sight—which came to him after prayer or in dreams” (Killens, 1970, p. 165).

Although the court later deemed this “High Priest of Sedition” to have had some role in the conspiracy, Philip was never tried. It was quite clear from the trial testimony that the conspirators often gathered at his house and that his words would help reassure any frightened recruits. However, because of his second sight, he predicted the failure of the revolt, and this probably explains why he did not face punishment. Philip claimed in his testimony that although the conspiracy was never specifically mentioned to him, “he had foreseen something of that sort, and therefore had advised his visitors, on one occasion ‘to give up the business’” (Killens, 1970, p. 165). Despite his rather ambiguous role in the rebellion, Philip’s presence is definitive proof of continuing Afro-Atlantic religious influences on slave resistance.

The significance of the caul with which Philip was born has far-reaching ramifications for the continuation of African spiritual conceptualizations in North America. The insightful interviews

performed in the 1930s by the Georgia Writers' Project illuminate the significance of the caul in communities across the American South. Ex-slave Mary Hunter claimed that her belief in ghosts was due to the fact that she "kin seem um. . . . Yuh see, I waz bawn wid a double caul obuh muh face and anybody knows dat a pusson bawn wid a caul obuh dey face kin sho see ghoses" (Georgia Writers' Project, 1940, p. 2). This widespread belief can be found throughout the slave South. A common interpretation of the meaning of the caul "as a sign dey will be bery wise an kin talk wid duh spirits" (Georgia Writers' Project, 1940, pp. 76-77) was a ubiquitous feature of the slave ethos (Puckett, 1929, pp. 137, 336). The near identical meaning of the caul among Africans in Dahomey, the Gold Coast, Dutch Guyana, Jamaica, Haiti, and the American South further demonstrates that enduring African spiritual concepts were lasting influences on the actions of enslaved Africans throughout the Atlantic world (Beckwith, 1969, p. 57; Georgia Writers' Project, 1940, p. 197; Herskovits, 1937, p. 95; 1967, p. 264).

AFRICAN CONJURERS IN DAY-TO-DAY RESISTANCE

Aside from their obvious presence in the trial records of slave revolts and conspiracies, conjurers also make their appearance in a number of slave narratives, interviews, biographies, and autobiographies as agents in day-to-day forms of resistance. Through these sources, there is ample proof that conjurers were an ever-present factor in the lives of the majority of North American slaves. No less an authority than William Wells Brown (1968) once noted that "Nearly every large plantation . . . had at least one, who claimed to be a fortune-teller, and who was regarded with more than common respect by his fellow-slaves" (p. 70; Levine, 1977, p. 69). Speaking on the widespread appeal of conjuration in South Carolina in the early 1800s, Charles Ball (1969) added that enslaved Africans "are universally subject to the grossest and most abject superstition, and uniformly believe in witchcraft, conjuration, and the agency of evil spirits in the affairs of human life" (p. 165). Combined, these statements demonstrate that not only were conjurers ubiquitous, but

belief in their supernatural abilities encompassed a large portion of the slave populace.

For Frederick Douglass, a conjurer named Sandy Jenkins of Easton, Maryland, created a shaping impression on his early life. After a savage beating he received at the hands of Edward Covey, a man “who enjoyed the reputation, of being a first rate hand at breaking young slaves,” Douglass eventually turned to Sandy Jenkins for aid. In Douglass’s words, Sandy was

not only a religious man, but he professed to believe in a system for which I have no name. He was a genuine African, and had inherited some of the so called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and eastern nations.

Sandy instructed Douglass to find the root of a herb in the forest that had mystical powers of protection. After undisclosed preparations, Sandy further instructed Douglass to wear the root on his right side because “it would be impossible for Covey to strike a blow; that with this root . . . no white man could whip [him]” (Douglass, 1969, pp. 203, 238).

To Douglass, talk of magically endowed herbs and roots was “very absurd and ridiculous, if not positively sinful.” These statements were guided, in part, by his acceptance of Christianity and can also be viewed as an appeal to both his writing audience and his fellow abolitionists. One of the key arguments used by abolitionists to undermine the legitimacy of slavery was that few slaves received true Christian instruction. This was tangibly measured by the persistence of “heathen” or “savage” African religious practices in the plantation South. Despite Douglass’s obvious disdain for conjure, he still wore the root. In August 1834, a confrontation Douglass had with Covey involved a protracted wrestling bout between the two that rendered the former Negro-breaker “as gentle as a lamb” for the next 6 months that Douglass lived with him (Douglass, 1969, pp. 239-250). Although Douglass never fully acknowledged it, the root in his right pocket was certainly a factor in his new spirit of assertiveness and resistance.

In another case, William Webb, a conjurer living in Kentucky, became concerned about the cruel treatment faced by slaves on a neighboring plantation. After secretly meeting with the slaves, Webb urged them to gather roots that were then placed into bags. The slaves then walked around their own quarters a few times and positioned the bags in front of their master's abode during the morning hours. These steps were taken to induce their master to have dreams about the slaves gaining retribution for past wrongs. Shortly after, the master reportedly began to treat the slaves decidedly better, and Webb's influence over the slaves was to increase dramatically as a result (Blassingame, 1972, p. 110).

In a case related to Henry Clay Bruce by a female slave from Amelia County, Virginia, a conjurer was said to have been employed to aid about 30 slaves who were fearing their imminent sale to the cotton fields of Alabama in the year 1800. Hearing of a conjurer living 10 miles away from the plantation, the slaves pooled their resources to pay him to set a hand or a jack on their master. After receiving 10 dollars in payment, this conjurer

went to the front door steps of the great house about twelve o'clock that night, dug a small hole under the ground step, took from his pocket a little ball, talked to it a while in a whisper, then kissed it and put it in the hole, and covered it carefully and came away. (Blassingame, 1972, p. 56)

The key was insuring that the master actually stepped over the hand; if that did not occur, then all the conjurer's preparations and incantations to make the charm effective would have been a wasted effort. Fortunately for those slaves, the next morning they "saw [the master] come down the steps and walk around a while, then go back over this particular step." It was thought that this insured the success of the hand. In any case, the slaves were never sold to Alabama (Blassingame, 1972, pp. 56-57).

Fugitive slave Henry Bibb related similar experiences. According to Bibb, the general prescription for dealing with an abusive master was "some kind of bitter root," which the slave was directed to chew and spit in the direction of their master. Along with the root were "certain kinds of powders, to sprinkle about their master's

dwellings. This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some peaceable manner” (Levine, 1977, p. 72; Osofsky, 1969, p. 70). After a conjurer gave Bibb the protective powders and roots, he did not receive a whipping for leaving the plantation without permission. Bibb firmly trusted in the powers conveyed to him, claiming that he had “great faith in conjuration and witch-craft,” which led him to believe that he could do what he pleased without getting flogged. Thus emboldened, he left the plantation again without his master’s permission. On his return, Bibb’s master punished him for absconding, but he added, “I did not believe that he could do it, while I had the root and dust” (Bibb, 1849, pp. 26-27; Blassingame, 1972, pp. 110-113).

Unfortunately for Bibb, however, his master was so enraged at his slave’s “saucy” retorts that he “grasped a handful of switches and punished [him] severely, in spite of all [his] roots and powders.” Despite the seeming failure of the charms of protection, Bibb was to consult yet another conjurer who gave him a concoction composed of fresh cow manure, red pepper, and hair from a White man’s head to safeguard Bibb from further abuse by his master. That Bibb was to continue believing in conjure even after evidence that the protective charms did not work is indicative of how much sway this practice had in the slave community (Bibb, 1849, pp. 25-31; Levine, 1977, p. 70).

Even the failure of these charms to protect slaves from their masters or from other Whites could be explained without disturbing the foundations of these spiritual beliefs. Henry Clay Bruce (1969) claimed that if a slave with a protective hand or jack

got whipped, and so reported to the old conjuror, he would promptly claim one of three things, either that someone removed the jack, or that the fellow had failed to carry out instructions, or had no faith in the jack, and therefore was deserving of punishment. (p. 53)

Not only did conjurers claim to possess supernatural abilities and charms to protect fellow slaves, these spiritualists were also able, at times, to avoid their own punishment from Whites. Susan Snow, an ex-slave from Wilcox County, Alabama, testified that her

mother was a Black African who could not be whipped by her master. This was due to Snow's mother being

a "conger" and dey was all scared of till the next day to get somebody to help tie her up, den he'd forget to whip her. Dey used to say she wa's a "conger" and dey was all scared of her. (Yetman, 1970, p. 290)

This fear was perhaps associated with conjurers having command over both esoteric and mundane means of retribution. Their knowledge of roots and herbs gave them the simultaneous ability to cure the ailing and to poison wrongdoers. This skill in creating toxic substances made Gullah Jack Pritchard, one of the key conspirators in the 1822 Denmark Vesey conspiracy, a feared presence among the Whites of Charleston, South Carolina. One of his contingency plans, in case the rebellion failed or was betrayed, was so frightening that all mention of it was intentionally omitted from the version of the trial record made publicly available by judges Lionel Kennedy and Thomas Parker. Henry Haig, one of the conspirators who turned state's witness, told the court that Jack

was going to give me a bottle with poison to put into my Master's pump and into as many pumps as he could about town, and he said he wanted to give the other bottles to those he could trust to [sic]. (Freehling, 1986, pp. 38-39; Killens, 1970, pp. xxiii-xxv; Pearson, 1999, pp. xvii, 1, 196).

John Blassingame (1972) argued that conjurers were "industrious enough to avoid punishment" and, in turn, told their slave comrades that "they were not punished because they had cast a spell on their masters" (p. 109). This was not always the case, however. In William Wells Brown's (1968) discussion of the conjurer Dinkie, industriousness alone did not explain his uncanny ability to avoid punishment. In fact, Dinkie was known to never work but was also never beaten or sold. Typically wearing a "snake's skin around his neck, carr[y]ing a petrified frog in one pocket, and a dried lizard in the other," Dinkie was such a feared figure on the plantation that

Brown claimed he was his own master (Blassingame, 1972, p. 113; Brown, 1968, pp. 10, 70-71, 79-80; Levine, 1977, p. 74).

Not only were conjurers thought to be able to protect themselves and others from punishment at the hands of Whites, it was also believed that they could foretell the outcome of rebellions and run-away attempts. This ability was said to have saved Philip, the blind preacher, from execution in the trials following the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. Philip predicted the disastrous outcome of the plot and discouraged slaves from continuing on their ill-fated path. In similar fashion, Frederick Douglass received a warning from Sandy Jenkins, who informed Douglass about a series of dreams he had while slaves on the plantation were plotting a mass escape. Sandy's interpretation of the dreams did not bode well for the conspirators, and he told Douglass (1969) "dare is sumpon in [that dream]; dare is, indeed, honey" (pp. 284-285). Despite these warnings, the slaves continued their plans. On the morning of the escape, Douglass himself had a premonition: "I had a sudden presentiment, which flashed upon me like lightning in a dark night . . . I instantly turned to Sandy Jenkins, who was near me, and said to him, '*Sandy, we are betrayed*'; something just told me so." Sandy replied to Douglass, "Man, dat is strange; but I feel just as you do." Within minutes, the plan was revealed, and the slaves were placed into custody (Douglass, 1969, p. 289; Levine, 1977, p. 69).

At times, the predictions of slave fortune tellers had positive outcomes. Uncle Frank of St. Louis, Missouri, described by William Wells Brown as a slave who "was very distinguished (not only among the slave population, but also the whites) as a fortune-teller," once predicted that Brown would successfully escape bondage. After being paid a fee of 25 cents, Uncle Frank gazed into a gourd filled with water and immediately relayed the results. Brown (1969) would later query "whether the old man was a prophet, or the son of a prophet, I cannot say; but there is one thing certain, many of his predictions were verified" (pp. 40-41).

In a more famous case, Harriet Tubman had frequent premonitions and visions while helping slaves escape from bondage. Sarah Bradford, Tubman's biographer, remarked that "she is the most

shrewd and practical person in the world, yet she is a firm believer in omens, dreams, and warnings.” Tubman reportedly had dreams that foretold her flight from bondage, helped her avoid pursuers during her missions in the South, and predicted the Civil War and the eventual emancipation of all slaves 3 years before these events actually occurred. According to Tubman, her father was the source of these abilities because he had an uncanny skill of predicting the weather and even foretold the Mexican-American War (Bradford, 1993, pp. 73-75, 92, 114-115).

CONCLUSION

Based on evidence derived from trial records, slave narratives, interviews, autobiographies, and other sources, a composite sketch of the “typical” slave conjurer can be drawn. Conjurers were often isolated ascetics, living on the margins of the slave community and wrapped in mystery. Their elevated status on the plantation and their mastery over mystical forces made them simultaneously feared and respected. These spiritualists claimed to possess a variety of supernatural powers including the ability to communicate with the spirit world and the power to heal the sick, and many claimed possession of second sight or the ability to foretell future events through interpreting visions and dreams. Their command of esoteric forces and other-worldly knowledge allowed them to gain influence over slaves, which resulted in conjurers playing central roles in various acts of slave resistance. In terms of their collective belief in conjure and magic, North American slaves shared similar cultural experiences with Africans throughout the Atlantic world. This conclusion, then, firmly situates the North American slave experience into context with other diasporic slave societies, while underscoring the notion that far from being accommodationists, North American conjurers were vital in the creation of a revolutionary consciousness among fellow enslaved Africans.

NOTES

1. The various terms *Koromantyn*, *Coromantee*, *Coromantin*, *Kormantine*, *Kromantine*, and *Cormentine* all refer to an important trading port located on the Gold Coast of Africa during the 17th and 18th centuries. The correct appellation, Kromantine, was the name of a key commercial region controlled by the Fante Kingdom of Efutu. Africans exported from this region of West Africa were principally Akan speakers.

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