# Hurston and Hoodoo

**Hoodoo** is a traditional folk [magic](http://www.answers.com/topic/magic) which originated in Central African cultures and migrated to the United States during the slave trade. The major African cultural contribution to hoodoo in the United States came from people of the Bantu language group.

Hoodoo is an informal system of folkloric practice, largely based on [African](http://www.answers.com/topic/africa) beliefs, though it draws significantly from [Native American](http://www.answers.com/topic/american-indian) folklore, especially in its use of [herbs](http://www.answers.com/topic/herb) and other [botanical](http://www.answers.com/topic/botany) ingredients. Over the years, due to cultural intermingling, elements of various [Jewish](http://www.answers.com/topic/jew), [Christian](http://www.answers.com/topic/christian), and [European](http://www.answers.com/topic/europe) folk religious and magical practices have also found their way into hoodoo.

Most practitioners of hoodoo are [African American](http://www.answers.com/topic/african-american-1), but [Caucasians](http://www.answers.com/topic/caucasian-race-1) and [Native Americans](http://www.answers.com/topic/american-indian) also use hoodoo, and it shares some commonalities with [Pennsylvania Dutch](http://www.answers.com/topic/pennsylvania-dutch) [pow-wow](http://www.answers.com/topic/pow-wow-game) magic. Traditional knowledge is passed person to person; there is no evidence of a structured hierarchy today.

The goal of hoodoo is to allow people access to [supernatural](http://www.answers.com/topic/supernatural) forces to improve their daily lives by gaining power in many areas of life, including [gambling](http://www.answers.com/topic/gambling), love, [divination](http://www.answers.com/topic/divination), cursing one's enemies, treatment of [disease](http://www.answers.com/topic/disease), employment, and [necromancy](http://www.answers.com/topic/necromancy). As in many other folk religious, magical, and medical practices, extensive use is made of [herbs](http://www.answers.com/topic/herb), [minerals](http://www.answers.com/topic/mineral), parts of animals' bodies, an individual's possessions, and bodily fluids, especially [menstrual blood](http://www.answers.com/topic/menstrual-cycle), [urine](http://www.answers.com/topic/urine) and [semen](http://www.answers.com/topic/semen). Contact with ancestors or other spirits of the dead is an important practice within the conjure tradition, and the recitation of [Psalms](http://www.answers.com/topic/psalms) from the [Bible](http://www.answers.com/topic/bible) is also considered magically effective in hoodoo. Due to hoodoo's great emphasis on an individual's magical power, its basic principles of working are easily adapted for use based on one's desires, inclination and habits.

Home-made potions and charms form the basis of much old-time rural hoodoo, but there are also many successful commercial companies selling various hoodoo components to urban and rural practitioners. These are generally called spiritual supplies, and they include herbs, roots, minerals, [candles](http://www.answers.com/topic/candle-2), [incense](http://www.answers.com/topic/incense), oils, floor washes, sachet powders, bath crystals, and colognes. Many [patent medicines](http://www.answers.com/topic/patent-medicine), [cosmetics](http://www.answers.com/topic/cosmetics), and household cleaning supplies have been also aimed at hoodoo practitioners and have found dual usage as conventional and spiritual remedies.

*Hoodoo* is used as a [noun](http://www.answers.com/topic/noun) to describe a magic spell or potion, as a descriptor for a practitioner (hoodoo doctor, hoodoo man or hoodoo woman), or as an [adjective](http://www.answers.com/topic/adjective) or [verb](http://www.answers.com/topic/verb) depending upon context. The word can be dated at least as early as [1891](http://www.answers.com/topic/1891). Some practitioners prefer the term *hoodooism,* but this has mostly fallen out of use. [Synonyms](http://www.answers.com/topic/synonym) include *conjuration,* *conjure,* [*witchcraft*](http://www.answers.com/topic/witchcraft)*,* or *rootwork.* The latter demonstrates the importance of various [roots](http://www.answers.com/topic/root) in the making of charms and casting spells. An [amulet](http://www.answers.com/topic/amulet) characteristic of hoodoo is the [mojo](http://www.answers.com/topic/mojo-1), often called a *mojo bag*, *mojo hand*, *conjure bag,* *trick bag,* or *toby*; this is a small sack filled with herbs, roots, coins, sometimes a [lodestone](http://www.answers.com/topic/lodestone), and various other objects of magical power.

## Differences between Voodoo and Hoodoo

Hoodoo and [Voodoo](http://www.answers.com/topic/voodoo) are often mistaken for one another, but although some believe that the terms may have a common [etymology](http://www.answers.com/topic/etymology), the latter probably did not influence the former to any great degree. The terms actually refer to different beliefs and practices and, despite what many people assert, there are virtually no elements of [Haitian Vodou](http://www.answers.com/topic/voodoo) worship in American hoodoo.

Voodoo is an established religion with its roots in the West African region now known as [Benin](http://www.answers.com/topic/benin-1) and [Dahomey](http://www.answers.com/topic/dahomey) and it developed among members of the Fon and Ewe language group. In [Haiti](http://www.answers.com/topic/haiti) it is practiced in a form that has been greatly modified by contact with the [Catholic](http://www.answers.com/topic/catholic) church.

Hoodoo is not a religion -- that is, it is spiritual and magical in nature, but it does not have an established theology, clergy, laity, or order of liturgical services. Hoodoo shows obvious and evident links to the practices and beliefs of Central [Africa](http://www.answers.com/topic/africa), specifically, the area that is now known as the [Congo](http://www.answers.com/topic/congo-haitian-mythology) and [Angola](http://www.answers.com/topic/angola). As such, hoodoo is closely allied to the the Congo-derived Cuban religion known as [Palo](http://www.answers.com/topic/palo-religion) and to the Congo-derived [Jamaican](http://www.answers.com/topic/jamaica) folk magic called [obeah](http://www.answers.com/topic/obeah).

Originally drawing upon concepts found in the indigenous [Nkisi](http://www.answers.com/topic/nkisi) worship of the Congo, and influenced by contact with the Catholic [Portuguese](http://www.answers.com/topic/portugal) since the 1400s, hoodoo did not assume its current form until it was brought to the [United States](http://www.answers.com/topic/united-states), where conjure workers were greatly influenced by [Protestantism](http://www.answers.com/topic/protestantism) and Southern [Evangelicalism](http://www.answers.com/topic/evangelicalism), with elements of the [Spiritual Church Movement](http://www.answers.com/topic/spiritualism) included as well. Many (and perhaps most) conjure folk in the USA identify themselves as members of one of the several [Baptist](http://www.answers.com/topic/baptist) denominations.

## References in other media

[Zora Neale Hurston](http://www.answers.com/topic/zora-neale-hurston) recorded many hoodoo practices and tales. Other authors on the subject include Harry M. Hyatt, Newbell Niles Puckett, Jim Haskins, and [Catherine Yronwode](http://www.answers.com/topic/catherine-yronwode).

Many [blues musicians](http://www.answers.com/topic/blues) have referred to hoodoo in their songs, and such elements have become important to the music. In addition to the expected terms *hoodoo* and *mojo,* other conjure words to look for in such songs include *jinx,* *goofer dust,* *nation sack,* *black cat bone,* *graveyard dirt,* and *black spider dumplings.*

Junior Wells sang in 1965:

*Lord, I wonder what's the, got the matter*

*Time, you know with time*

*It seems like the hours, everything done changed*

*But I hold up my hand,*

*Lord, I'm trying make you understand*

*Lord, you know, uh, everybody they tell me,*

*Somebody done hoodooed the hoodoo man*

Since 2004, Dr. Christos Kioni, a conjure doctor from [Florida](http://www.answers.com/topic/florida), has co-hosted and produced a weekly hour-long [podcast](http://www.answers.com/topic/podcasting) on the subject of hoodoo called "The Lucky Mojo Hoodoo Rootwork Hour."

[*The Skeleton Key*](http://www.answers.com/topic/the-skeleton-key), a [film](http://www.answers.com/topic/film) released in [2005](http://www.answers.com/topic/2005-in-film), centers on the practice of hoodoo.

In English, Australian, and New Zealand sports journalism, the word hoodoo refers to a team's series of losses, as in "Manchester United breaks ten-game hoodoo." This usage derives from the false notion that hoodoo magic consists only, or primarily, of [curses](http://www.answers.com/topic/curse).

The first [battleship](http://www.answers.com/topic/battleship) of the United States Navy, the [USS Texas](http://www.answers.com/topic/uss-texas-1892), commissioned in 1895, was referred to by nickname as the "Old Hoodoo" due to a series of incidents that occurred after she was commissioned that gave her a reputation as an unlucky ship. The code letter "H" that was assigned to the Texas at that time may have also contributed to the inspiration. At the [battle of Santiago, Cuba](http://www.answers.com/topic/battle-of-santiago-de-cuba), on July 3, 1898, the "Old Hoodoo", in the words of a contemporary New York Sun article published shortly after the battle, became the "Old Hero".