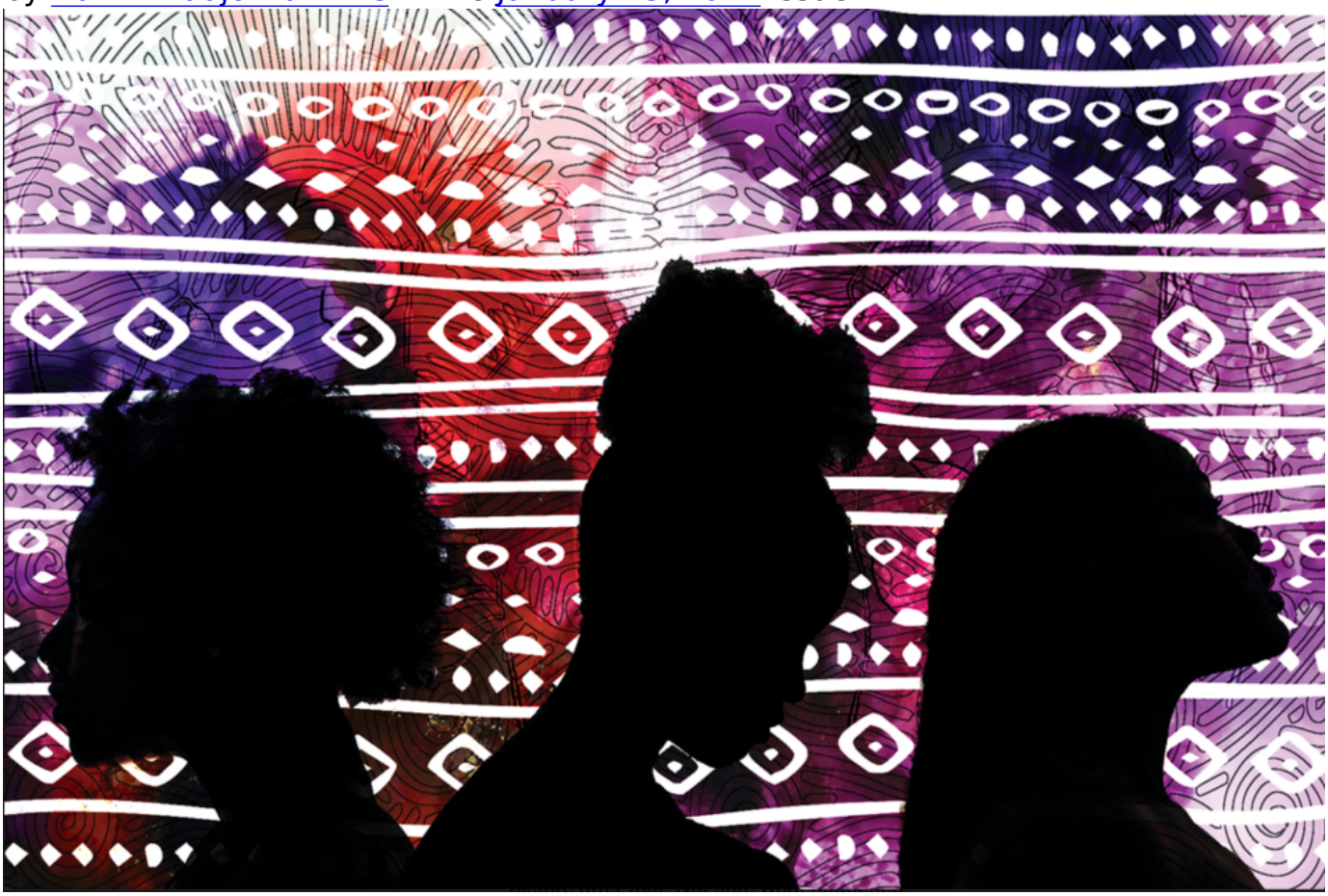
Why some young Black Christians are practicing hoodoo

The ancestral religious practices of the African diaspora were forced underground by the White church.

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins in the January 13, 2021 issue



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In 1928, novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston drove her gray Chevrolet down to New Orleans to study under the city's best hoodoo doctors. She was collecting information for a book on Black American folklore, and when *Mules and Men* was published seven years later, Hurston declared that hoodoo was "burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion."

In calling hoodoo suppressed, Hurston was making a point about the resilience of people in the African diaspora. Enslaved Africans who were brought to the United States and forcibly converted to Christianity didn't unlearn the spiritual practices of their motherlands. As a matter of survival, some of these practices—like hoodoo—were taken underground. Others—like spirit possession, reframed as "catching the Holy Ghost"—were ensconced in Black church culture.

Today, some Black millennials and Gen Zers are trying to reclaim, as best they can, the original beliefs of their African ancestors—while maintaining their ties to Christianity. In various degrees, they're diving into practices associated with indigenous African cosmologies like herbal magic, communication with ancestral spirits, and the use of sacred objects. They're determining for themselves what is "evil" and what has merely been maligned by White supremacy in the church.

"We've been brainwashed for so many years to think that this is bad, that it's of the devil," said Frunshana Whitaker, a 28-year-old Nashvillian who's spent the last six years studying hoodoo and vodou. "Because they knew how powerful it was, and they needed to strip us of everything. And what better way to do that than to say, 'Hey, you're damned to hell if you practice these things'?"

Hoodoo, also known as root work, is Black American folk magic, forged in the South but derived from various West African cosmologies. Unlike vodou, a formalized combination of Catholicism and ancestral African spiritualities (hence its popularity in Haiti and New Orleans), hoodoo is not a religion.

That works well for Whitaker, who doesn't identify with any particular religion, although she attends a nondenominational church with her husband and kids. She said she's learned how to take what she needs from a sermon and leave the rest. Her core spiritual practices are using healing crystals, meditating, praying, and talking to God. "Mainly, I'm talking to God. I talk all day, every day," she said. "For me, it's having that personal connection."

Whitaker doesn't do spells because she doesn't see the point. "I'm not saying that I will never do it," she explained, "but most of the things that I see people doing spell work for is relationships. And I feel like if you got to do all that for it, you don't need it anyway."

Mick Holt—a 26-year-old self-described pago-Christian from Chicago—does do spells and says they are nothing more than ingredients that strengthen prayers. "It's just

about the characteristics of herbs and flowers and flora and how they can enhance human life," they said.

Holt, who is queer, was raised in a "super Baptist" home but began exploring different religions as a teen because of the anti-queer rhetoric they were hearing at church. It just didn't match their personal experience of God, and it made them abhor Sunday worship. Holt didn't know where to go. The thing was, they still believed in God—the God of the Bible, even—just a different sense of that God.

"A lot of people think God is this omnipotent, omniscient being in the sky. This just one being," Holt said. "But I was like, no, there's God in everything. Even in the wind blowing through the leaves, and the sun shining through the clouds."

Holt looked into ancestral spiritualities like Yoruba and shamanism but ultimately found their home in Wicca, a non-Africana pagan religion that nevertheless shares many characteristics with African cosmologies, including an animistic respect for nature. Now a Wiccan high priest and herbologist, Holt performs rituals every equinox and solstice. They also observe the pagan festivals Samhain and Yule.

But Holt still hasn't told their family about the evolution of their spiritual practices over the last decade.

"I'm already kind of the black sheep for being queer," they said, laughing. "I didn't want to add another tick to the tally marks, you know?"

For many young Black people embracing magic and mysticism, the fear of ostracization is real. Black culture, after all, remains very Christian. According to the most recent data from the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of all Black adults in the United States identify as Christian. Furthermore, Black people are more likely than any other racial demographic to believe in a literal interpretation of scripture.

That doesn't leave a lot of room for extra-biblical spiritual practices.

Besheer Mohamed, who studies Black American religion at the Pew Research Center, said it's important to keep that in mind when looking at trends like this. "That's the background for all this churn and change."

Ajiona Lunford, a 23-year-old veterinary nursing student at Florida A&M University, has experienced this conflict firsthand. While she is Christian, she doesn't believe her ancestors would have been Christian if it had not been forced on them. She's

been studying African spiritualities since high school and regularly meditates with crystals and burns sage to clear the energy around her.

Lunford said she gets the most pushback about her spiritual practices from her grandmother, who doesn't understand why Lunford would choose to meditate rather than pray when she's overwhelmed.

"But I feel like when I meditate, I'm talking with my inner self," Lunford said. "If I want to talk to God, I can talk to God. But if I want to calm myself down and talk to my inner self and my inner spirit, then I can do that too."

Whitaker said her mother constantly warns her to be careful, which Whitaker finds unnecessary because she doesn't use hoodoo for nefarious purposes.

"There's good and bad in everything. People can take things from the Bible and turn it into something bad," she said. "I think no matter what religion it is, what spiritual practice it is, you have to be able to have a certain degree of discernment to know if something feels wrong."

Setting boundaries has been key for Deun Ivory, who considers herself something of a traditionalist. She's an unabashed Bible-believing Jesus lover who doesn't give credence to crystals, astrology, or lunar energy. ("I have my own convictions around that," she told the Century.) But she does meditate in order to receive "spiritual downloads" from God.

Ivory, 30, is best known for her work as the art director for Black Girl in Om, a lifestyle brand for Black women interested in things like yoga and mindfulness. Before leaving last year to start her own nonprofit for Black survivors of sexual trauma, Ivory was also the cohost of the brand's popular eponymous podcast, which regularly discusses topics like tarot and magic.

Working in that environment, Ivory had to learn how to balance staying true to herself with being open-minded.

"Now, I'm not saying be open-minded to all things, because, you know, God talks about the path of righteousness: it's a narrow road," she said. "But I feel like sometimes we shut ourselves off from understanding God in this expansive way. We limit him to being one particular thing or being one particular way. And I don't know God to be that way."

Her advice for Black Christians interested in unpeeling the layers of White supremacy and colonization from their faith is to feel free to explore new practices and ideas, understanding that God is a tether and not a cage.

“Personalize your journey with the Lord, line it up with the word of God. And go. And be. There’s grace upon your life,” she said. “If you’re scared, explore with a cautious heart. If you are against the grain or doing something that other believers are judging you on, if you have the word to support it, I feel like no one can say anything about it.”

Researching new spiritualities can be overwhelming, so Holt recommends that Black Americans, to the best of their ability, find their ancestral African religion and start there. “If it’s not going to cause you any bodily, emotional, or mental harm, go for it,” they said. This is especially crucial for young queer people suffocating in conventional organized religion.

“It’s really hard to be a queer person in the Black community. So many Black LGBTQA youth have killed themselves, have gone out into the streets because they are who they are. And if learning about your heritage can give you a little bit more in your back pocket just to keep you going for that next day, please do it,” they said.

The point is not necessarily to disavow one religion in favor of another, Whitaker said. Rather, it’s to find a way to have an authentic faith while being authentically Black.

“You can still go to church and practice these things,” she continued. “But we didn’t always know about White Jesus. There had to be something before that.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Black magic Christians.”