
ESCAPE FROM SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS AS DEPICTED IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR FOLKTALES

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Abstract: The Blacks deported to America were a bundle of both new beliefs and old practices. As much as they embraced Christianity, though many times out of compulsion, so much so were they mindful of holding onto their own religious practices. As a result, even in the new land, there were Hoodoo doctors, witchcraft practitioners, conjurers and magicians. They were held in honour by the Blacks living around them in the plantation. Many tales were narrated by the Blacks about these mysterious people which resulted in a substantial collection of tales which could be termed as black supernatural tales. These tales talk at length about the religious beliefs that were native to the African soil. In these tales, escape from conjuration, magic spells, ghosts and evil spirits is talked of. These escapes also have hidden implications. This paper tries to analyze both the escapes and their implications.

Keywords: Conjurers, Hoodoo doctors, conjuration, witchcraft.

Blacks, taken to America, were exposed to a new religion called Christianity. They were compelled to follow a religion which was unfamiliar and strange. While many Blacks did accept Christianity, many held on, deviously, to their former religious practices and beliefs. As a result, in the new world, there emerged a multifarious society among the Blacks. This mixture of both new and old beliefs defined Blacks in America as unique and distinct people who had an identity differing from other races of the world including other Blacks in Africa. The Blacks living in America created their own folktales which contained beliefs and superstitions that were carried from Africa. Ghosts, magicians, witch doctors etc are the central characters in these tales. Unlike other folktales in which escape from the White masters is sought, the supernatural tales in the black vernacular usually talk of escaping from fellow Blacks who were conjurers or magicians. In addition to this, there were also hidden messages in these tales where supernatural beings were used to typify certain characters. At times ghosts and devils were used to refer to their white masters and escaping from them meant escaping from the white landlords. In the tales that talk of supernatural elements, supernatural powers are attributed to conjurers, black witch doctors and voodoo priests. These tales tell that even the Whites feared such people. Such attributions therefore gave satisfaction to the Blacks that they had some inherent power that kept even their otherwise merciless masters at a distance. These tales also serve the purpose of giving continuity to the religious beliefs of the Blacks. Those who embraced Christianity were ill treated and advised to suffer patiently, whereas, those who held onto their native religious beliefs especially, these voodoo priests, were feared and avoided by some Whites. Escape is sought when someone feels captured. Confinements and oppression accelerate the urge to escape. While the

Blacks sought to escape human tyranny, hierarchical supremacy, social commitments, physical toils etc., they also sought to escape from conjurations, ghosts, evil spirits, curses, magical spells and the like. Escape from such elements is termed as supernatural escape. The black culture has its own popular beliefs, superstitions and religious dogmas. Such beliefs and practices usually have positive as well as negative effects on people who believe in them. Conjuration (African American folk magic) was an ancient practice amongst the Blacks, which meant casting magical spells on people. These spells were believed to have adverse effects and thus people were afraid of being conjured. The practice of conjuration was transported from Africa to America and among the Blacks in America there were conjurers who were still revered and listened to. The Black vernacular folktales talk at length about escaping such evil spells. Under supernatural escapes, the need to escape the shackles of supernatural elements is studied. Supernatural elements could mean conjuration, ghosts, evil spells etc. To escape these elements, supernatural intervention is sought. Whether ghosts and other spiritual beings exist is debatable, but for the Blacks who created stories using them, they really existed. Therefore, while attempting to study such tales, it is necessary to see it from the Blacks' point of view and not frown at it as just superstition. In Black folktales, conjurers play a vital role. They were attributed with supernatural powers and were sought after for both conjuring and escaping conjuration. Conjurers were called by different names. It varied from region to region. While those who had settled in America were called as 'Hoodoo Doctors,' or 'Voodoo Priests,' in parts of Haiti of the Caribbean islands they were called gangan. The cult priest is usually referred to as a houngan, a Fon... title meaning "spirit chief." Sometimes he is called gangan (a Bantu word

meaning “conjurer” or “doctor”) or *capla*. (A Treasury, 28)

These conjurers were believed to be people possessed with supernatural spirits which enabled them with magical powers. Even among conjurers, those with two spirits enjoyed a better privilege over those with just one spirit. Moreover, conjurers were said to be possessed by either good spirits or bad spirits. Those with good spirits were again considered to be more powerful than those with bad spirits. These differences in status resulted in professional rivalry. Black tales, thus talk about a more powerful conjurer casting a spell on a less powerful conjurer. As a result, many conjurers seek to escape the evil spell of other conjurers too. For instance, in the tale “Uncle Monday” the rivalry between 2 conjurers namely Uncle Monday and Old Judy Bronson is dealt with. Uncle Monday is not a fictional character. Uncle Monday really existed. He was a Black man who was captured and brought to America as a slave. He later escaped to the Indian territory of Florida and gathered a group of tribesmen whom he often led in retaliation against the Whites. (Uncle Monday, 55) In the tale, he is shown as a man who believes in his totemic ancestry and claims to be a descendant of a clan of alligators. He is believed to hold meetings with alligators and have control over them. Such mythical beliefs associated with conjurers elevated their status and earned them respect. Even the Whites stayed away from them. Uncle Monday is frowned by Old Judy Bronson. She herself being a conjurer, rivals him. In the end, Uncle Monday casts his spell on her when she goes fishing. She falls into the water and feels numb all over. Just then she sees Uncle Monday walking across the lake with a trail of alligators. He says,

“When you quit putting your ignorance and your weakness against me, you can get out of the water. I put you here and here you will stay until you lay and acknowledge” (From My People 41)

Was what she saw real or just a hallucination is subject to arguments, but in the end, she is rescued by her relatives who believe that she might have had a stroke and would have fallen into the pond. Even when she ascertains that she saw Uncle Monday, they dismiss it as just an imagination. The authenticity of such experiences cannot be determined, but many tales have been built around such experiences. Such tales kept the African culture alive in an alien land. By telling such tales, the Blacks were able to remember and celebrate their African ancestry. Displaced from their home land, the Blacks were able to keep alive their beliefs and practices through these stories. In a world that practiced an entirely new religion, such tales infused life into their religious beliefs. In this tale, Judy Bronson is subjected to

vicious magical powers by a more powerful conjurer and consequently seeks to escape it. This escape from conjuration is talked of in various other tales like *The Goophered Grapevine*, *Po Sandy*, *The Conjurer's Revenge* and the like. Tales talking of supernatural escapes contain supernatural beings like devils, demons, witches etc. Amongst the Blacks deported to America, many were considered to be witches who operated in a unique way different to that of a conjurer. In “*Ridden by the Night Hag*” Frankee, the old black female slave is feared as a witch. She is said to possess the ability to shed her skin to commit evil deeds. Such a practice is called *hagging* by the African Americans. Folklorist David Hufford says the hag experience has 4 symptoms: 1) awakening 2) hearing and seeing something come into the room and approach the bed 3) being strangled 4) the inability to move or cry (African American Folktales 144). Theodore, the slave in this tale feels hagged by old Frankee. Since Theodore reveals the truth to the master that Aunt Frankee carried liquor with her and drank frequently, she hates him and tries to hag him. Theodore often feels hagged and shrieks when strangled by some force exerted by Frankee. While undergoing such experiences, He becomes speechless and numb. The master listening to Theodore's choking and strangling sounds calls out enquiring what was wrong with him. The enchantments exercised on Theodore prevent him from replying. Only after the master call out for Aunt Frankee does she leave Theodore off her evil spell. Theodore says, he had undergone similar experiences a several times. He dreads it and longs to escape it. He escapes it only when his master's call compels Aunt Frankee to leave Theodore and respond to him. As mentioned earlier, such experiences are laughed at by the Whites. When Theodore tells his master that Aunt Frankee was a witch who frequently rode (enchanted) him, his master replies, “Why don't she ride me? I will give her a dollar. Ride me old hag, and I will give you a dollar.” (African American Folktales 146) The fact is Aunt Frankee rides on Theodore but not on her master. If she were really a witch why does not she hag her master? Theodore's reply is, she would not dare to do it. These tales do leave so many questions unanswered. While many Blacks sought to escape slavery using the help of conjurers, none seemed to ask these conjurers to conjure their masters. Even while the witches bewitched other Blacks, rarely did they practice their enchantments against Whites. Whatever tale that the African Americans told, reference to fleeing white domination and escaping the tyranny of the slave owners always found a place. The tale ‘*Mary Bell*’ talks of a woman (Mary Bell) escaping from her demonic husband. Being displaced from her house (hometown), she feels trapped in her

husband's house (foreign land). She sees heads of women up and a cast of blood in her husband's house (From My people,65). The demonic husband is also addressed as "Massa" by the rooster in the house. These characters typify certain people. The demonic husband typifies the White slave owners who are often referred to as a "devil" or a "massa". The displaced Mary Bell reminds of the displaced Blacks who were enslaved in bizarre circumstances in a foreign land. The corpses in the husband's house are images of brutality that remind the readers of the sufferings of Blacks and Mary Bell's desire to escape back to her house signifies the longing of the Blacks to escape the cruelties of the Whites and may be get back to their own homeland, i.e., Africa. Finally, Mary Bell uses magical needles to escape from her husband. She flees his house and on the way drops these needles. These needles obstruct the chasing husband by causing a forest to grow and then a wall to be erected. Before the demonic husbands clears these obstacles, Mary Bell steps into her father's house. Thus the tale implies that to escape the clutches of the white masters, supernatural powers (magical powers) were essential. That is why these black cult priests claimed to possess special powers and were able to defy the authority of the Whites. Like Uncle Monday, such supernaturally enabled individuals were able to gather tribesmen around them and rebel against the Whites. Conjurers were also looked upon as deliverers who can deliver the enslaved Blacks from the Whites. The Blacks associated themselves with the Israelites in the Bible who suffered unlawfully at the hands of the Egyptians. They could draw similarities between themselves and the Israelites. The Biblical character, Moses, too was a favourite among the Blacks. While the Black spirituals look up to a deliverer in Jesus, the vernacular tales that talk of supernatural elements,

look up to a conjurer with magical powers for deliverance. For instance, in the tale How Hoodoo Lost His Hand, Moses is seen as a conjurer who performs miracles before Pharaoh. The incident of Moses' staff swallowing the rods of Pharaoh's magicians is tailored to express the Blacks' way of understanding it. The author says,

"So theirs turned to snakes. And the crawled up to Moses' snake, and Moses' snake swallowed up their snake. And that's where hoodoo lost his hand..."

They lost their rods, and he had his and theirs too."

(From My People 64)

As explained earlier, the challenge between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians is seen as a challenge between two hoodoo priests in which, eventually, the one with good power (spirit) wins. This tale has double references. For one, it signifies professional rivalry between two hoodoo priests and on the other hand it projects a conjurer as a deliverer who can defeat the schemes of the tyrant king Pharaoh who signifies the White masters.

Conclusion: After analyzing the vernacular tales with supernatural elements, it is evident that whatever be the tale that the blacks told, escape was always a characteristic inherent in it. These tales, while attempting to talk of escape from supernatural beings and phenomenon, simultaneously talk of the clashes and rivalry that existed among the black community itself. Unlike other tales which talk about escaping white tyranny, these tales talk of escaping from spells and magical enchantments caused by fellow Blacks. It is clear that the Blacks had trouble even from people of their own kind. Professional rivalry, vying for power, using supernatural powers for personal gain and also looking up to a conjurer as a deliverer is some salient features of these tales with supernatural elements.

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