Root Doctors [1]

Root Doctors

by John J. Beck, 2006; Revised November 2022.

Root doctors are the traditional healers and conjurers of the rural, black South. They use herbs, roots, potions, and spells to help and sometimes to hurt recipients of their ministrations. Root doctors are still common in the region and found in many rural areas of North Carolina. The practice of "working roots" is familiar to many black Americans living in the South, though apparently not as commonly known today among white Southerners. Voodoo is a more widely known version of the conjuring tradition most associated in the popular imagination with New Orleans, although the term "voodoo" or "hoodoo doctor" was commonly applied to root doctors in other parts of the South.

The ideas and practices that came to define the root doctor undoubtedly had their origins in the folk beliefs of West Africa, the region of origin of many of the people brought to the South as enslaved people of white Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The root doctor traditionally treats natural ailments with various remedies made from such plants as mint, jimson weed, sassafras, and milkweed. Some remedies have genuine medicinal properties, while others are at least soothing, and the psychosomatic effect of any remedy cannot be underestimated. Treating a victim of a spell is more complicated. The individual might be sick, inexplicably drawn to someone, or experiencing profound anxiety. The doctor must first discover if conjuring is the cause of the problem. The severity and suddenness with which the symptoms appeared may provide a clue, or sometimes physical evidence of the spell exists. A powder, often known as "goofer dust," may be found. Once the doctor determines that the problem is a spell, he or she must prescribe the proper rituals and potions to restore harmony to the patient's life.

Root doctors may also be asked to "put a root" on someone, a process that often involves concocting goofer dust from such elements as graveyard dirt and powdered snake or lizard. A wife may ask a root doctor to put a root on her husband to stop him from seeing other women, while a man pining for a woman might ask the doctor to work a spell on the object of his affection. Finally, root doctors may also prescribe a "mojo" to ward off spells. One North Carolina mojo described in several sources is a dime worn around the ankle. A small bag filled with a preparation made of various plant and animal ingredients and worn around the neck has also been a popular mojo. In an often hostile and capricious world, the mojos, spells, and herbal preparations of the root doctor have provided believers with treatment of their ills, protection, a way of hurting enemies and attracting lovers, and, importantly, a sense that they need not be passive victims of circumstance or fate.

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Holly Matthews, "Doctors and Root Doctors: Patients Who Use Both," in James Kirkland and others, eds.,*Herbal and Magical Medicine: Traditional Healing Today* (1992).

Additional Resources:

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Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.[7]

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