



Cemetery hoodoo: Culture, ritual crime and forensic archaeology

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ABSTRACT

In 2012 and 2014 the author was a consultant to law enforcement regarding crime scenes of a ritualistic nature in the American Southeast. These ritual activities were expressions of folk magic spells linked to certain West African traditions. These spells were used for magico-religious, curative, and 'justice' (i.e. revenge) practices known as *hoodoo*, *conjure* or *rootwork*.

The ritual activities were conducted at gravesites in a public cemetery. When standard investigative police procedures failed to produce anything substantive with which to solve, prevent, or even understand the motive beyond one of 'vandalism,' or 'kids fooling around,' the author was approached to contribute forensic archaeological and anthropological insights that had thus far proved elusive. This article is an examination of how cultural anthropological understanding and a forensic archaeological "eye" to an outdoor crime scene can re-define crime scene investigative methodology and interpretation.

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1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to discuss alternative approaches to crime scene investigation and interpretation when unique, non-mainstream religious elements are present in ethnically-linked ritualized crime. This article is not intended, however, to address "Satan-worship" or other so-called anti-Christian network "cult" activities, which the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigated nation-wide and debunked during the Satanist cult-craze accusations of the 1980s [5,8,12,20]. Said accounts of horrific activities of sexual abuse, cannibalism and human sacrifices by self-identified survivors of cult activity were found to be blatantly fictitious (a strategy for lucrative book sales at the peak of an occult-hungry popular culture industry at the time), a result of widespread social mythology and panic, or based upon "repressed memories." Repressed memories have lost much credibility in the forensic world and are often suspected to be the result of leading questions and suggestion under hypnosis.

Today, the majority of homicides and violent crime associated with cult-like groups, when not linked to issues of mental illness or diminished capacity in some form, have been found to be composed mainly of disenfranchised young men and their followers who justify their violent actions with convenient claims of devil worship. In those groups the power dynamics, sexual manipulation, and exploitation often depend upon using the allure

of supernatural claims and fear to bind the group to their leaders' agenda and authority, often with the leader gleaming the most benefit – whether through outright profit or the satisfaction of complete control over others.

Rather, this article focusses on cultural traditions unique to specific populations based upon their shared ancestry, history and social dynamics within a larger, dominant society. Furthermore, ritual acts based upon tradition that are defined as criminal activity will produce a crime scene that defies standard investigative methodology because they are not linked to the victims the same way and/or the motivations are not immediately obvious. Behavioral evidence at the crime scene may be easily misinterpreted or go unrecognized. There were subtleties in the subject case of this article regarding *hoodoo/conjure/rootwork* that have origins in a non-Western folk tradition.

Hoodoo practices are typically handed down generationally, through individuals within families recognized for carrying the mantle of special ritual knowledge. They are tasked with maintaining the responsibility to use their knowledge wisely and for community benefit. Believers are afforded opportunities to turn to these ritual specialists in order to take control over their own circumstances and, in concert with spiritual intervention, to influence fate. It would have been impossible for law enforcement to understand offender connections to the cemetery disturbances or their selection process for "victims," to identify predictability patterns, or to have the ability to create a plan for apprehension or deterrence without a non-Western understanding of the

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community's religio-cultural traditions or a working relationship within those communities

Hoodoo itself is not a religion per se, and has erroneously been named interchangeably with "voodoo" by those unaware of the difference. Instead, *hoodoo* is a set of ritual practices that encourages human agency to bring about desired outcomes and provides a sense of empowerment that prayer alone does not. *Hoodoo* is defined for the purposes of common understanding in this article as:

A collection of spiritual and folk magic practices born of syncretism incorporating West African tribal spirituality, European (Christian symbolism and supernatural components) and Native American spiritual traditions that evolved historically and continues to evolve under contemporary social, spiritual and economic pressures. Hoodoo is not devil worship under a Western, Christian-based perspective. Hoodoo practices were historically used for curative and protective purposes, to communicate with the ancestors and in the era of enslavement also incorporated and expanded to include spells for 'justice' or revenge.

There are a number of African and Caribbean magico-religious cultural traditions and these should not be confused with *hoodoo* discussed in this article. References to *hoodoo* and the case study in this article are specific to the cultural traditions with tribal origins from West Africa and found primarily in the South Carolina Lowcountry [10].

Lastly, this paper is not intended to be a complete accounting of *hoodoo* and all of its incarnations involving gravesites or other locales where folk magic rituals are performed as there is a wide scope of practice and purpose. Rather, this paper will address the specifics of the behavioral and material evidence left behind at the crime scenes of this case and draw from the incidents about which the author was consulted or participated in as a forensic archaeologist and anthropologist. It will include historical background that explains select hoodoo magic rituals relevant to the crime scenes, examine the materials used and contents of the gravesite deposits in detail that reveal clues to their purpose. Analysis will incorporate anthropological theories on how ritual serves social, cultural and psychological needs in a community. This article strives to provide a deeper and more balanced understanding of certain populations in a community that will in turn benefit law enforcement in their investigative strategies where ethnic identity and their belief systems are components.

2. Cemetery disturbances and initial responses

In 2012, cemetery maintenance workers in a region of South Carolina Lowcountry noticed disturbed earth among rows of graves located at the back boundary opposite the entrance road of the cemetery. Upon closer inspection they discovered unusual objects scattered over the top and around selected grave sites. By 'unusual,' it is meant these were not the typical graveside remembrances such as flowers, keepsakes and articles of personal significance one expects to find left by loved ones paying their respects to the deceased. Furthermore, and much to the alarm of the maintenance crew, some of the graves had been partially disinterred as well, where someone had dug down approximately two to two and a half feet (60–90 cm), mainly at the foot end of the burial plot. Some of these had been partially (hurriedly?) re-buried and tell-tale piles of dirt were still left by the side of the grave that had not been shoveled back into the hole.

In the course of restoring and refilling the partial disinterments, workers found jars full of an unrecognizable liquid substance, deposited at the bottom of the dug out area over the casket. Only in

one case did it appear the offender(s) may have been attempting to reach the casket lid, with a narrow burrow that went down nearly three feet (90 cm). However, the burrow stopped abruptly, was empty and implied an abandonment of the task possibly out of fear of being discovered, the task becoming too physically demanding for the offender, or having run out of time.

Surface object scatters included one or more of the following: eggs – broken and unbroken, black chicken feathers, white chicken feathers, candle wax (black and white), coins, pieces/strips of cloth (mostly white, but at least three were black), chicken blood, red pepper pods, empty beer cans, parts of polaroid photographs, and empty black salt packets. Initially, maintenance workers collected these materials and quickly disposed of them. They systematically re-filled partially disinterred burials, cleared off the gravesite surfaces and restored appearances so that no sign of the disturbances remained.

Cemetery management feared public stigma and loss of confidence in their funerary services, which in turn would result in harm to their business were these incidents to become public knowledge. There was also the concern for the privacy of the families of the deceased and the distress it would cause them if the names of their loved ones and their disturbed burials were made public. When efforts by the cemetery's private security failed to catch offenders and the disturbances continued, the cemetery manager elected to contact law enforcement authorities. Police had to contend with lost or destroyed evidence and crime scenes eradicated or rendered unworkable. Some of the maintenance crew had taken pictures before repair efforts were completed and these were provided to law enforcement and to the author, who also took photographs of subsequent disturbances.

There were conflicting accounts for how many gravesite incidents there had been before law enforcement became involved. It is the author's estimate from discussions with cemetery personnel coupled with law enforcement conversations that about three to four incidents had occurred before authorities were asked to intervene. Part of the incentive to break the silence was due to the unrelenting and increasing number of disturbances in as many weeks.

Cemetery personnel and law enforcement assumed that the disturbances had to have taken place during late night hours. As desecrations continued, security was tasked with installing cameras attached to trees or existing structures and turning them on at night in an effort to capture images of offender(s) in the act. However, it appeared that the cameras had been discovered and skillfully avoided or rendered inoperative by the offender(s), much to the frustration of everyone involved. Law enforcement had increased their drive-by patrols at the cemetery late at night, but the disturbances, while not as frequent, continued.

Initially, law enforcement believed these activities to be the work of teenage pranksters and drinking parties creating mischief to generate fear and gossip in the community. Some thought the incidents represented a "game" for rebellious juveniles taunting law enforcement, wasting time and resources. However, the consistency of ritual patterns and their recurring nature despite increased risk, belied simple vandalism and implied to the author that the individuals involved were dedicated to their purpose and that their purpose was worth the risk to them.

A pattern of gravesite selection emerged in that the more recent graves seemed to be targeted. Law enforcement turned to commonly accepted investigative methodology that included searching for links between offender and 'victims,' (the deceased) but this created obstacles rather than facilitated efforts. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the cemetery insisted that police maintain the strictest confidentiality. In their view, this included prohibiting public awareness as well as discouraging law

enforcement from contacting and thereby notifying, relatives and friends of the deceased whose graves had been desecrated. Police turned to investigating the cemetery owners' possible conflicts with customers, personal relationships, or business dealings, wherein a motive may have been to damage the business financially or attack its reputation. Despite best efforts, no connections could be identified.

Police concluded that the strategy of disturbing recent graves was probably motivated by the condition of the soil, which was already loosened and easier to dig compared to compacted older graves. Finally, law enforcement and cemetery management determined that if not juvenile vandalism, perhaps a 'voodoo' group may be involved based upon the use of chickens and chicken's blood at the crime scenes. There evolved a general misunderstanding of African-American religious traditions based upon stereotypes and popular (and erroneous) representation of so-called "voodoo" in entertainment media. Some cemetery personnel commented that they believed "devil worship" was behind the incidents. These sentiments contributed confusing and unhelpful speculation, primarily causing alarm that the end goal would be defilement of the corpses for ominous reasons. No leads were generated and law enforcement attempts to interact with the black community for more information were met with a wall of silence. When these strategies turned up as investigative dead ends, the author was contacted to assist with analysis of crime scenes of a ritual nature. The author was also known to them as a forensic archaeologist and anthropologist, and crime scene interpretive skills were sought.

3. Consultation and participation of a forensic archaeologist/anthropologist

In the spring of 2012, the author was approached by local law enforcement about a series of ritualistic activities involving disturbed gravesites in a local cemetery; while the cases analyzed in this article represent only those that occurred at this cemetery, there were incidences of similar activities in other regional cemeteries as well. However, none of those will be covered as these incidents occurred outside the jurisdiction of the law enforcement entity with which the author was consulting and officials in those other jurisdictions did not approach the author for assistance.

Local law enforcement was familiar with the author primarily through her previous participation and consultation on other forensic matters, but they were also aware of her work as an archaeologist on both North American and International sites, specializing in ritual objects and behavior. By inviting the author's involvement, law enforcement hoped to gain insight through her forensic and crime scene expertise that incorporated historical and cultural (anthropological) understanding for the motives behind the cemetery disturbances. A better understanding would aid in apprehension of offenders and prevention of similar future crimes. For the sake of confidentiality and to protect the privacy of the deceased, their families, and the cemeteries that could be harmed directly or indirectly by identifying specific locations including the identity of the police department and town, that information will be withheld. Suffice to say, this case occurred in the state of South Carolina and the author provided assistance to law enforcement agencies in several different counties for various crimes, missing persons, suspicious deaths, and body recoveries among a number of jurisdictions during this time.

Acknowledgement and permission from the law enforcement agency involved in the case was obtained before writing and publication of this article. It is the cultural and interpretive insights drawn from forensic archaeology and anthropology in crime scene analysis that will be the focus for this paper. It is a goal to encourage

law enforcement to retain the help of specialists and academics when needed, as most are happy to assist when asked.

Consultation first involved a briefing by the main officer tasked with investigating the crimes, and discussions with several cemetery workers including maintenance and grounds keepers, office personnel and reviewing photographs taken by them and police of gravesite disturbances and the artifacts left behind. The author visited the disturbed gravesite locations to get a contextual understanding of the landscape, and understanding of vehicular versus foot traffic access in and out of the cemetery, and in one instance, participated at a gravesite crime scene that occurred after the author had been invited to participate and consult on these incidents. An examination of the ritual behavior and forensic archaeological interpretation of disinterment activity using forensic archaeology and cultural anthropological knowledge of African American traditions revealed at least three different kinds of *hoodoo* spells. These included curative spells that were related to sexual dysfunction, revenge spells for breakup of relationships, and at least one protective spell against illness and misfortune.

Hoodoo rituals of the kind found would have taken 20–30 min or more to complete. Many involved the use of candles; if undertaken after dark a flashlight or a full moon would also have added light to activities, while others would have been carried out at dawn or early daylight hours. In those cases, cameras that were automated and scheduled for night time run and shut off by day would have been useless, missing the perpetrator(s) altogether.

The ritual activities would have been visible to passersby in vehicles on roads near the cemetery had the timing been less advantageous. It is possible that the act of digging could have been misinterpreted by observers as cemetery workers simply doing their job or other activities being less obvious to a passerby if done quickly in daylight hours. It is worth noting that there were towns in the vicinity with significant population size and so it must not be assumed that the cemetery was so isolated and away from the public eye that these activities would go unnoticed or without risk of discovery for the offenders no matter the time of day.

Methodology and interpretation of the cemetery crime scenes necessitated a departure from Western concepts of 'victimology.' Victimology is taught following criminological investigative methodological models to seek connections between offender and offended. This includes looking into a victim's background, acquaintances, activities and so forth that lend themselves to being targets of a crime. Did the victim cross paths with the offender or in some way share the same routine or space with possible interaction, or did the victim fall into a population category with a higher risk of becoming a victim?

Furthermore, the lens through which "victims" are examined are typically based in at least one or more of three acknowledged standard motivations for crime: sex/jealousy, revenge or monetary gain. While some of these are relevant motivations underpinning *hoodoo* practices as well, the understanding of the process toward harnessing supernatural intervention and protocols are not common knowledge and function on a different set of rationales. These include the proper time of day in which to perform the ritual depending upon the kind of spell being set into motion, the spirit to which entreaties are being made and their personalities which must be appeased, what kinds of enticements appeal to the spirit(s) to act on your request, and so forth. All of these influence the manner in which an individual performs a ritual and determines his/her behavior at the crime scene.

Hoodoo/conjure practitioners themselves would likely argue the concept of victimization in these circumstances, since many would consider their actions to be victimless (aside from the intended recipient of conjure justice/revenge spells) – certainly not for spells intended as curatives or for protection. However, from the law

enforcement perspective: 1) the victims included the deceased in terms of defacing or desecrating their graves; 2) the survivors – family and friends of the deceased whose graves had been violated; and 3) the owners of cemetery properties whose business and reputations had been jeopardized.

To better understand the nature and intent of *hoodoo*, it is necessary to go beyond the fictional stereotypes and popular culture representations of African magico-religious belief systems. Many of these also perpetuate bigoted misconceptions.

4. Brief history of hoodoo in the American Southeast

Conjure or *hoodoo*, also known as *rootwork*, are traditions originating in African-American folk magic; *hoodoo* practices were transported to the American Colonies with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and adapted by the enslaved, incorporating Native American and European concepts as well [1–3,7,10,15,16,18,19,21,22]. *Hoodoo* is primarily a combination of folk magic and herbal medicine used to combat common ailments, intervene and redirect relationship issues, offer spiritual protection, bring good fortune, pay tribute or communicate with ancestors, divination, and implement vengeance when the social justice system fails the practitioner. Knowledge of curative properties of local plants and herbs were borrowed or traded from Native American healers or by trial and error as the enslaved experimented to find similar curatives parallel to those used in their African homelands.

It should be noted that *rootwork* can be a misleading phrase, as it does not necessarily refer to herbs and plants or their ‘roots.’ Rather, *root* refers to magical concoctions or charms, so a *rootworker* is one who is trained in *creating magical charms or other magical artifacts* and can harness supernatural power to put them into action for a desired result.

Many *hoodoo* rituals were born in a period of American history rife with disempowerment and oppression among enslaved peoples. It provided hope and solace from the conditions of enslavement and a sense of empowerment granted by the spiritual world that was denied them from the human world [2]. Enslaved African populations in the history of the American Southeast were multicultural too, and so were their traditions. Although there are a number of African and Caribbean magico-religious cultural traditions – these should not be confused with *hoodoo* discussed in this article. Reference to *hoodoo* is specific to a cultural tradition with tribal origins from West Africa and found primarily in the South Carolina Lowcountry.

In the historic era, most plantations’ slave quarters housed at least one *hoodoo practitioner* or *rootworker* to which the enslaved turned for medical and spiritual assistance. The enslaved typically approached the European physician with suspicion. Frequently, they did not have access to medical care in a timely manner. European planter classes called in a doctor often as a last resort when work production was affected. Most enslaved people relied upon their own *root doctors* who combined medicinal knowledge of plants with supernatural ritual for cures, protections and other benefits to believers.

In the early settlement period of the 17th and early 18th centuries of the American Southeast, Native Americans were the primary enslaved population among European plantation owners. Some Europeans brought their enslaved African workers with them from Jamaica and Barbados (sugar cane plantations) and other places where they had established plantations but where the living conditions and demands of the environment differed from the American Southeast [6]. Enslaving Native Americans was problematic in that they were more familiar with the environment than their European masters; runaways were difficult to recover because they could elude capture and survive quite well once liberated.

Secondly, Native Americans frequently fell victim to European illnesses and diseases, which made investment in them a risky venture as one could and did, lose money when epidemics broke out.

Europeans began importing more captured Africans by the mid-18th century in larger numbers, and the Africans eventually replaced the enslaved Native populations or intermarried with them. Enslaved Africans were often allowed to trade their own handmade wares and personal garden produce with friendly Native groups for pottery and personal items. Traditions and techniques for food procurement, preparation, pottery, and other daily life necessities were shared and influenced on both sides. Likewise, Africans exposed to European Christian religions that were originally used to convince the enslaved that their lot in life was ordained in order to quell unrest or rebellion came to view themselves as Christians and saw no conflict with their African belief system and use of *hoodoo*. All of these influences contributed to the evolution of *hoodoo* practice and its multicultural nature.

Color symbolism was and is a strong component in West African and Native American cosmological folklore. Native American and African groups associate specific colors with sacred cardinal directions and the spirits aligned with them. In contemporary contexts, color can also be associated with economic benefit and success in any endeavor (green and yellow respectively). White and blue are representative of water and water spirits in traditional African spirituality, and were used for protection spells. White can be represented not only by candlewax but with common items for protective spells. Blue jar “trees” are a common contemporary yard ornament in the Southeast, where bottles of blue glass have been placed over the end of tree branches or created tree forms, hung from tree branches, or placed on garden displays to bring good luck, protection and peace to the family.

This case study documented white feathers and white candlewax at the gravesite. Red and white are often associated with love spells and/or breakups. Conjure bags made of flannel cloth tied around other objects can also be deposited in the earth that add power to the spell [2,9,13,17].

Historically, archaeological excavations conducted in South Carolina and neighboring southeastern states have uncovered white oyster shell ritual deposits buried beneath slave quarter cabins: along doorways, in corners and below windows in Ref. [14]. Salt was a substance used in blessings; in contemporary times black salt, black candle wax, and black cloth is typically used for curses, hexing, and revenge spells.

5. The forensic archaeology

While the investigation began with one local cemetery, the disturbances spread to other rural cemeteries over time. In each instance the pattern of using recent graves was the only consistent element among all sites. Many of the graves were on the periphery of the cemetery where new grave plots were often added, but there were some exceptions. A few gravesites with ritual activity were in heavily trafficked areas with an unobstructed view from the road. These were plots previously purchased as part of a family section that were not availability-based choices at the time of death. Among peripheral border gravesites, however, graves selected for ritual activity did tend to be the farthest from the cemetery office with shrubbery or structures that partially obscured the view from the road.

The age range of decedents included both young and old, male and female of varied ethnicities including Caucasian, African American and others with no discernible pattern of preference. However, it is interesting to note that there were no children’s graves (individuals under 18 years old) even though they may have been recent, that were used for ritual during the author’s

involvement. The majority of graves were partially disinterred on average from 60 to 75 cm down. The offender(s) removed soil most often at the foot end of the gravesite, although some were dug at the mid-point along one side. In one instance, the burrow appeared to go deeper than was typical (approximately 1.25 m, or over three feet) but no ritual deposit had been placed in that burrow. Most burrows were from 20 to 50 cm wide and dug with a common shovel.

Surface artifacts consisted of empty beer cans (no obvious brand preference), coins mainly in denominations of dimes, nickels, pennies, and occasionally quarters. Monetary amounts varied but typically came to less than \$2.00. Surface scatters of artifacts expanded out from the grave and headstone up to approximately ten feet. Other notable surface deposits were hen's eggs, blood (chicken?), feathers (black and white), pieces of polaroid photographs, remnant candlewax drippings on or around the headstone, empty salt packets, bits of shell (possibly oyster) and sealed 'spell' jars that had specific ingredients in them.

6. Analysis of spell jar contents and discussion

Two jars were recovered from cemetery personnel and their sealed contents were delivered to the author for analysis. Officers working the case requested input as to possible motivations and intent behind the behaviors. In absence of a working understanding about these activities there was concern that besides finding ways to catch or stop the perpetrators, desecrations might escalate to involve the human remains.



Photo 1. Author holding two Spell Jars. Photo by author.

Initial examination of the bottles revealed a systematically assembled deposit that appeared to follow a prescribed selection of ingredients and method of handling. I concluded that these were *spell jars*, known among the Gullah in the South Carolina Low Country, Georgia and beyond. Each jar had wax poured beneath the lid with wax paper on top to create an airtight seal. The lid of the first bottle, a quart sized Ball Mason jar, was additionally wrapped with black cloth and tied with black ribbon. The second bottle, a used Smuckers Jelly or Jam jar, had no additional wrappings. Jars previously used for sweet jams or jellies are often associated with relationship spells, and it was in this jar that the target of the spell was a female, based upon the polaroid photograph found within it.

There was a deposit of melted black candle wax on the center of each lid, which had burned long enough to drip generously down the sides of each bottle. In *hoodoo practice*, some spell jars have a prescribed altar ritual that takes place first in the home of the *root doctor* before it is taken to the place where the main ritual will be performed. These in-house rituals may last hours or days depending upon the nature of the spell jar. Due to the selection of contents, method of sealing and remnant candle wax, I concluded

these jars had indeed gone through a first step ritual process before they were used in the cemetery.

The *hoodoo* practices I describe here share ritual components from among tribes originating in Sierra Leone, Senegambia, and the Kongo-Angola region of Africa. The reader should be reminded that variations exist for the processes and specific ingredients; the material analysis presented here should not be taken as a rigid step-by-step prescription for all spells that have the same goal [4, 11,22]: 24–25). Commonalities are indicators of a shared symbolism that incorporates basic elements necessary for a desired result, but each *root doctor* typically personalizes and creates variations for their own "recipe," depending upon their areas of expertise and understanding of power at their disposal. The surface scatter materials and the contents of the spell jars in this case suggest that spells ranged from revenge/relationship breakups, to request for curatives, and blessings. Of four burial disturbances for which the author was a consultant/participant, only two had spell jars deposited in the partially disinterred graves. The other two disturbances were surface scatter deposits. The author examined law enforcement photographs of several of the previous burial disturbances, but was not able to examine and analyze any of those previous deposits or scatters. For that reason, only the four burial and surface scatter deposits will be examined for this case study and only two with spell jars will be examined in detail. All analyses are by author.

6.1. Spell jars

There was dirt (presumed "goofer dirt" present in both jars; "goofer dirt," is dirt taken from a grave of someone perceived as a powerful individual, or one whose manner of death is significant to generate or invoke spiritual power and enhance the efficacy of the spell. Another possibility is that dirt samples could have been taken from a footprint of the intended victim of the spell (see Table 1a and b).

Each of the jar spells were placed in different graves more than a week apart. This is consistent with the kind of spells represented, which are known as 'petition' spells. Petition spells or 'baneful' (negative) spells request aid from the spirits or ancestors. Written material like the note in Jar 1, are likely to have listed the wish of the practitioner against the male pictured and/or the complaint against him. Other contents: black cloth and ribbon on the outside of the jar, black candlewax, urine or ammonia and red peppers all speak to anger and cursing. A petition spell requires that the jar be set upon an altar in the home of the *root doctor* for a number of days before set in motion with a ritual at the cemetery.

These are relationship spells having to do with a breakup and hexing the individuals the petitioner holds responsible for their pain and suffering. It would be reasonable to infer that the 'jilted'

Table 1a
JAR #1 – Ball Mason Canning jar.

Black Candle Wax dripped on lid & glass
Black cloth cover w/Black ribbon over lid
Wax paper under lid
Wax poured seal under lid
Eggs – number unknown
Urine?; ammonia smell present
Oily substance
Red Pepper pcs
Plastic pcs – odd shapes – from unknown object
Partial Polaroid Photograph; part of a male face; caucasian
Paper, white – degraded; handwritten text unreadable
Dark, organic dirt
Unidentified organic matter – appears to be botanical

Table 1b

JAR #2 – Smuckers Jam/Jelly jar.

Black Candle Wax dripped on lid & glass
No cloth cover or ribbon on lid
No wax paper under lid
Wax poured seal under lid
Eggs – number unknown
No urine – no ammonia smell
Red Pepper pcs
Plastic pcs – odd shapes - from unknown object
Polaroid Photograph; female pictured, caucasian
No paper
Dark organic dirt
Unidentified organic matter; botanical

party is the one responsible for the spells, and that they (the two spell jars) appear to be connected. The polaroid photographs appear to be rather old and the clothing styles suggest a period in the 1970s or early 1980s for both photos. This further suggests the affected relationship may have been long term and the individuals familiar to the petitioner for a number of years.

The presence of eggs in both jars is somewhat contradictory; eggs are normally used in protection and a means for a practitioner to chase away perceived curses and negativity. But, in the case of relationship spells of a negative nature such as these two spell jars, eggs can also be used to try to make someone leave the area.

6.2. Surface scatter materials

Surface scatters included eggs, black and white feathers, salt (black salt packets left behind), beer cans, coins, candlewax. In one instance a plastic bag containing the remnants of 9–12 eggs were whole and broken, along with black and white chicken feathers, a splattering of blood (presumed chicken blood). The bag of eggs had been thrown against a tree about 10 feet away from a disturbed grave. Eggs are normally used for purifying spells and to rid oneself of perceived curses. The motivation behind breaking eggs against a tree in this particular ritual is consistent with that objective. Coins left on the surface of graves are symbolic payment to the spirits in thanks for their help. White feathers, eggs and candlewax are indicative of a blessing spells [4, 15].

The nature of these four gravesite rituals required different times of the day when they would have been performed. Thus, cameras set to turn on and off at midnight or later hours in the cemetery would not have been effective against all of them [17]. The use of recent graves was based upon the belief that the recently dead act as 'mules' (similar to the way the term is used in the illegal drug world) in that their spirits can carry the spell over to the Other World to release it and set it in motion. The recently deceased do this unwittingly, as the ritual 'attaches' the spell to them. The practitioner does not have to know the individuals who have passed away and in fact, likely would never have met them. Thus, young, old, male, female and of various ethnic backgrounds,[4,7] those whose gravesites were targeted were selected based upon their recently deceased status. The exceptions are when the deceased are very young – or in cases of suicide or violent death – this may have a bearing on how or whether their graves are appropriate for use in specific rituals. Law enforcement and cemetery personnel were unnecessarily anxious in believing that the goal of these acts was to violate the corpses of the dead themselves..

7. Conclusion

Between 2012 and 2014, the cemetery suffered fewer and fewer disturbances. Law enforcement continued to patrol the area late at

night, and cameras were used for a period of time but tapered off when they were found to be ineffectual (to my knowledge, their settings of operation continued for midnight and after hours as management believed this to be the time when most of the disturbances occurred). Some of the rituals would have been conducted at daylight or during daylight hours, and it is possible practitioners were hiding in plain sight, as no one would have expected these activities to be carried out during the day. To the author's knowledge daytime or dawn patrols were not requested.

It is also important to note that *hoodoo rootworkers* are known throughout their communities, much the same as they were in historic times and enjoy a certain status. It is unlikely that the activities in the cemetery were unknown to people from the community at the time they were occurring. Believers of any ethnic background can visit a *root doctor* and purchase the proper charms, spell jars, etc. but must take what is purchased and set the spells in motion with their own hands, following the instructions of the *root doctor*. As in times past, individuals who feel they are outliers, unempowered, and suffer from socio-economic inequalities will turn to belief systems that help them to feel hope, control over their situations and to feel bonded with others in their community. The author's familiarity with the ritual activities and materials of the *hoodoo* community were linked to archaeological research that were still recognizable in contemporary contexts, and personal relationships with individuals familiar with *hoodoo practices* [14].

As a final note, the individuals pictured in both spell jars were Caucasian. This is not to say that African-Americans weren't interconnected in mixed ethnicity relationships. However, it is presumptuous to believe that the individuals who performed all the rituals in the cemetery were all African-American, and this too may have been part of the problem with detection – Caucasian offenders were not on the radar.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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