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EXCERPT FROM *JUMPING THE BROOM: THE SURPRISING MULTICULTURAL ORIGINS OF A BLACK WEDDING RITUAL*

INTRODUCTION: A MULTICULTURAL TRADITION

In the early twentieth century, an anonymous woman told an interviewer her story of a broomstick wedding that took place on an antebellum southern plantation. It was her mother's recollection, one she returned to often, that "when the colored folks got married, the man would lay the broom down on the floor with the bushy end to the north, then he would take the girl by the hand, then they step over the broom, then backward again. Then the girl picked up the broom, laying it down again with the bushy end facing the south, then the girl took the man by the hand and they step over it and backward again, to keep evil away and bad spirits through their life." It was an exciting ritual to witness, for "mother said many a night she would steal down and watch when she heard some of the colored folks were going to get married" (Hyatt 1965, 465).

The enslaved couple's actions were rich in unspoken symbolism. The ritual process undertaken in this wedding likely reflected generations of cultural adaptation and reinvention that characterized many enslaved communities throughout the Americas. Given how receptive people of African descent were to adopting and innovating different cultural expressions while simultaneously creating their own, one can surmise that the ritual blended a variety of beliefs into a single ceremony (Brown 2014; Gomez 1998; Sweet 2003; Thornton 1998; Young 2007).

By clasping one another's hands, the couple exhibited a symbolic bond that denoted partnership and the ability to complete tasks as one. The man initiated the ceremony by providing the broom, laying it down, and taking the woman's hand before the jump, and his bride repeated the same actions after she reversed the broom's position. One could interpret these maneuvers as a sign of completion, reflecting the journey from en-

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gaged to wedded. Just as the man initiated the courtship, the woman confirmed it by accepting his proposal and initiating the ritual's conclusion. In this sequence, the groom completed his tasks to begin the process, but it only concluded when the bride fulfilled her obligations. In other areas of the South, the bride's refusal to step over the broom sometimes signified her rejection of the marriage (Rawick 1972, 87).

In its entirety, the ceremony expressed a process of equality and balance. Both partners alternated in retrieving the broom and initiating a jump with the other. By laying the broom down with the bushy end to the north, completing a jump, and reversing its position, the couple ensured they fulfilled both directional pulls by jumping forward *and* backward in a unilateral motion, from east to west and vice versa.

The ceremony reflects beliefs surrounding the importance of the cross symbol popular among Black southerners. Forming a cross guaranteed protection, since "it pointed towards all four cardinal points; hence allowing nothing to get by it" (Puckett 1928). Imbedding the cross in the ritual motions of this ceremony ensured that nothing could sever the symbolic importance of the union and that the newlyweds would be protected from any malevolent forces that sought their destruction. Even if this was physically unattainable under American slavery, an institution that frequently ripped families apart, it fulfilled the psychological needs of a people whose domestic lives were consistently unpredictable.

Alternatively, these enslaved people were possibly recreating a Kalunga line, which serves as a threshold separating the terrestrial realm from the ancestral (Thompson 1984, 109; see also Stuckey 1987, 13–14). According to the religious philosophies of West Central Africans, crossing this partition allowed them to commune with the ancestors in a space that was literally inverted, even to the point that people walked with their feet pointing up in an upside-down position. The physical manifestations of this philosophy are most distinctly preserved in a Brazilian martial art called "Capoeira," in which competitors sometimes invert their bodies in both offensive and defensive strikes. Black combat traditions and religious practices throughout the Western Hemisphere also have similarities (Desch-Obi 2008). Even if the spiritual connotations are unclear in this particular broomstick ceremony, the broom's north/south orientation would require the participants to jump east/west, perhaps symbolizing the couple's links to Africa and America. By using such directions during a wedding ceremony, they were, at least symbolically,

subverting the Middle Passage's devastating impact upon Black kinship ties.

The ceremony revealed its utility for the enslaved in the conclusion. No slaveowners were present, meaning that this individual tradition was free from their influence. This couple's calculated maneuvers of jumping back and forth in multiple directions safeguarded them from evil spirits, and, as they assisted each other over the broom, they accepted one another's partnership upon entering domestic life. Lacking any overt reference to Christianity, this ritual's philosophical connotations were not constrained by religious doctrine. Untroubled by slaveholders or the supernatural, these practitioners gave the broomstick wedding a cultural richness that was not always apparent in other ceremonies.

Though rich in detail, this account resembles many others in that it does not explain *why* certain enslaved people jumped over a matrimonial broom. Narratives that discuss the tradition rarely explore its origins, and they seldom comment on its symbolism with any significant detail. Either they were not interested in contextualizing its historical origins, or, more likely, they simply did not know where it came from or how it was popularized in their own community.

As a result, the ritual mystified scholars for many decades. Historical information on the broomstick wedding was largely unavailable to the public eye for much of the twentieth century, as most references were buried in the narratives of formerly enslaved people long ignored by scholars. However, by the 1970s, historians, inspired by political movements in the United States, sought to tell the story of slavery from the perspective of those in bondage. They investigated American slavery from a cultural vantage point and engaged the topic of slave marriage with unprecedented vigor. They argued that enslaved people's private lives were profoundly expressed in their intimate associations with one another, and they portrayed them as more than laborers; they were people who loved, lost, and claimed their dignity. Examining the intimate lives of people who were often voiceless was a herculean task that required a variety of approaches. In this ever-growing genre of cultural history, one finds microhistories of how the enslaved married on specific plantations, case studies of individual states, comparative histories, and ambitious attempts to encapsulate slave marriage within the broader sociopolitics of the nineteenth-century United States (Burton 1985; Cody 1982, 1987; Davis 1997; Dunaway 2003; Hudson 1997; Jones 1990, 37–63; Joyner 1984; Malone 1992; Pargas 2010; Stevenson 1996, 226–257; West 2004, 43–79;

Wetherell 1981). Though jumping the broom is mentioned regularly in most of these works, it rarely receives more than a single page of analysis, since many authors claim it was a quaint custom that none of its practitioners took seriously.¹ Many publications exploring the broomstick wedding's popular appeal lack scholarly rigor. They mention only one or two narratives from people formerly enslaved, or simply rehash findings from other secondary works. Few examine its origins across the Atlantic or the possible reasons it was adopted by enslaved people in North America.²

Given the broomstick wedding's importance during various periods of American history, this is not only a significant oversight in studies of slavery, Atlantic history, African American studies, and the African diaspora; it also troubles many Americans who seek to use the ritual to connect with their ancestral heritage. Engaged couples and wedding planners remain confused about the broomstick wedding's place in American history and its meaning for modern Black Americans, specifically those descended from enslaved Africans. Moreover, the fact that jumping the broom is a transnational phenomenon is largely unknown. Where did it come from? How was it acquired? Did participants ever divulge their thoughts on its purpose? What is its legacy over time? This book hopes to answer these questions, while also emphasizing that the broomstick wedding was not confined to a single group. If culturally based studies reveal anything, it is that customs in the African diaspora did not develop in a vacuum and that such traditions can be shared across racial and ethnic groups (Joyner 1999; Sobel 1987).

PRECEDENTS AND POSSIBLE ORIGINS

Popular media in the United States understandably credits the broomstick ceremony to African Americans, largely due to its contemporary appeal and its close association with enslaved people in the U.S. South. In fact, jumping over the broomstick is so intertwined with the African American experience that it has led one publication to assert, "If you're not African American, there's a fairly good chance you have not heard of jumping the broom" (Lamanna, Riedmann, and Stewart 2014, 180). Though such weddings occurred in European communities before they did in those of African Americans, white Americans are, with a few exceptions, largely unaware of the custom when reflecting upon their own cultural heritage.³ The problem surely lies in representation. Until re-

cently, questions surrounding the custom's origins were hardly explored in most popular features, and its visual representations rarely portray its multicultural roots.⁴

Perhaps surprising to those who see broom-jumping as a quintessentially African American practice, its origins are far more geographically and ethnically wide-ranging. The earliest references to jumping a matrimonial broom stem from groups throughout the British Isles, including Romani, Celts, and English laborers. Subsequently, one finds references to the practice continuing in the United States after migrants from these groups arrived. On both sides of the Atlantic, people of European descent used it for various reasons.

The transnational, multicultural dimensions of the practice might prompt a question for those seeking claims to cultural ownership: Is jumping the broom a custom of African Americans, Romani, Celts, or rural Euro-Americans? Perhaps it belongs to all of them. If so, how could these distinct communities, separated geographically by land and sea, and socially by racism, ethnocentrism and classism, all come to utilize a similar marital custom at similar moments in history? Historically, we know it was a folk practice used by groups who sanctioned their marital unions independent of ecclesiastical or governmental surveillance. Such groups were often marginalized by a ruling elite, ostracized by their surrounding communities, and/or geographically isolated. Consequently, their cultural customs were considered strange or esoteric, and they were often mocked for such practices. The historical record is not entirely clear as to how the custom gained its popularity among socially ostracized communities in the British Isles, as their oral histories do not usually speak to its origins. They simply state that their ancestors used it and provide details on how it was performed.

Although the origins of the European practice of jumping over a broomstick for matrimony are cryptic, we do know that broomstick folklore extends to ancient societies and that broomsticks were used for both practical and symbolic purposes. They are simultaneously a domestic necessity and an ominous symbol. As early as the sixth century BCE, Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras counseled his followers to "not step over a broom," though the reason for this proscription remains enigmatic (quoted in Zhmud 2012, 178). Pythagoras's rule was carried through the centuries to Roman philosophers in the first century CE, when Plutarch explained why priests of Jupiter were forbidden to pass through

paths overspread with vine branches: "Is it not of the like nature with those precepts of Pythagoras, not to eat in a chair, not to sit upon a measure . . . and not to step over a broom?" (Goodwin 1906, 263). While Plutarch does not expound upon Pythagoras's reasoning for avoiding brooms, he does explain how particular objects have symbolic qualities. "Now to go under a vine," he wrote, "hath reference to wine, because it is not lawful for a priest to be drunk, and they are depraved and debased thereby; whereas it is requisite that they should be above pleasure and conquer it, but not be subdued by it" (Goodwin 1906, 263). Thus, for Plutarch it was not necessarily the object itself, but what the object represented. Vine branches above the head of a priest of Jupiter represented an inversion of the power dynamic, and crossing underneath the branches indicated that the priest was willing to violate a sacred covenant, if only metaphorically. Crossing over a broomstick likely had similar implications, and the connection between leaping across the broomstick and entry into the domestic state evolved over time.

In 1922, Hungarian psychoanalyst Geza Roheim argued that passing over an object held cosmological significance to various groups, and he linked most of these events to a symbolic act of "coitus" (Roheim 1992, 13). Roheim maintained that while the selection of objects differed from culture to culture, the connection between crossing over and fertility rites required men or women to cross over particular objects either to prevent pregnancy or to accelerate it. The broomstick likely symbolized a phallus, and a woman's willingness to "jump over" it suggested two things: first, that she was willing to invite someone into the act of procreation; second, that she was in a dominant position relative to the phallus (Biedermann 1992, 50). Consequently, folklore developed around its connections to marriage and sex, as some British communities maintained that if an unmarried woman strode over a "besom-handle" she would become a mother before a wife, while others used the colloquialism "She's jumped o'er the besom" to signal that a woman had a child out of wedlock (Addy 1895, 102). The connections between marriage, broomsticks, and witchcraft are especially apparent, as women who did not conform to the standards of patriarchal monogamy were labeled dangerous. In one example, a Polish woman in Detroit, Michigan, was accused of witchcraft in 1892, and her accusers demanded she "jump over a broomstick" to prove her innocence ("A Polish Witch in Detroit" 1892, 1). Her accusers likely believed she was incapable of completing the act if she was, in fact, a witch. In addition,

the general practice of “leaping over” objects was also found in societies outside Europe. In the early twentieth century, for example, John Roscoe observed that the Baganda ethnic group of Central Africa believed that if a man had a young child, he was required to step over both the child and his wife prior to departing for a journey, for “should he omit these precautions, and during his journey have sexual intercourse with any other woman, his child would die, and his wife would also fall ill” (Roscoe 1911, 17). His failure to physically perform this act was directly tied to supernatural consequences. In these various cases, the objects could be animate or inanimate, and the only apparent requirement is that the symbol held value to the participant and their hope for positive outcomes.

The object’s symbolic associations are where the connection between jumping the broomstick and the marriage ceremony is most interesting. Broomsticks are used for domestic purposes in most cultures, but the marital tradition of jumping the broomstick is most heavily documented in two locations separated by the Atlantic Ocean: the British Isles and North America.⁵ Within both locations, various cultural groups practiced the ritual, including ethnically distinct Celtic groups, Romani, English sailors, enslaved people of African descent poor southern whites, and various frontier communities. While each of them shared a similar experience of social ostracism, isolation, or marginalization, they are commonly analyzed separately from one another. Very few scholars have ascertained the cultural connections among Celtic groups, African Americans, British Romani, Louisiana Cajuns, and white Americans living in rural areas.⁶ Each group had its own traditions and folklore, but their use of the matrimonial broomstick is the one practice that links them together. How did their marital traditions become intertwined? The answer lies in looking beyond each group separately and scrutinizing the process of transoceanic migration throughout the early modern period and into the nineteenth century.

Oppressed people have remarkable ingenuity in forming social units to combat, or at least curtail, psychological violence. As folklorist Patricia A. Turner argues in her study of rumor in African American folk history, Black oral traditions reveal how enslaved people developed “countermeasures” to contest the enslaver’s domination (1993, 40). Similarly, historian Stephanie M. H. Camp explores how enslaved communities utilized “hidden or indirect expressions of dissent” to combat the psychological traumas of bondage, arguing it was a way for them to

reclaim “a measure of control over goods, time, or parts of one’s life” (2004, 2). As a form of “cultural resistance,” these expressions were both defensive and offensive in nature, enabling enslaved people “to attack directly the ideological underpinnings of slavery” (Young 2007, 12). The broomstick ceremony’s most attractive feature for any marginalized group is the practitioners’ ability to integrate it into their community’s needs and freely adopt other components into its mix. By adopting, adapting, and reimagining the broomstick ceremony, enslaved communities throughout the antebellum South could use this custom to build community and formulate a culture. Since slave weddings were not constrained by a standard method of performance, I avoid identifying those broomstick weddings that included Christian customs as “hybrid ceremonies” formulated in the diaspora, since they were not necessarily a combination of two mutually exclusive cultural practices. In fact, many of the British ceremonies were already “hybrids” that combined Christian elements with the group’s previously established folk customs. By the time the broomstick wedding was introduced to enslaved people in the eighteenth century, it likely contained aspects of Christian ceremony intermingled with folk traditions and the enslaved probably did not view these as being in conflict. For both American and British practitioners, the only requirement for the marital bond to be secured was the successful jump over the broomstick. Any additions to the ceremony resulted from the unique circumstances of the specific cultural group.

Though it is often difficult to pinpoint the precise moment of any cultural exchange, transmission, or development, historians have long argued that many cultural practices in early North America developed through the interactions between Africans and Europeans. Some practices transferred unchanged, while others were adjusted to meet the needs of the appropriating group. It is less important to locate the exact moment when a cultural practice shifted from one cultural group to another than it is to demonstrate that it did so and to analyze how its meaning and significance were likely revised in the process of such adaptation.

NOTES

¹ One of the few exceptions to this rule was Ophelia Settle Egypt’s work, “Raggedy Thorns,” which entitled an entire chapter “Jumping de Broomstick.” However, Egypt’s manuscript was rejected by many presses and remains unpublished. Versions of her

manuscript can be found in the Ophelia Egypt Collection, Series E, Boxes 140-12, 140-13, Folder 2.

² Exceptions to this general rule include Hunter 2017, 46–48; O’Neil 2009; Parry 2015.

³ The exceptions to this rule are those who affiliate themselves with neopagan communities in both the British Isles and the United States and who employ the custom in homage to a pre-Christian Celtic ancestry. See Dunwich 1991, 59–60; 2007, 155; Griffyn 2002, 17.

⁴ For recent journalistic treatments, see Eddings 2018; Shamsian 2017.

⁵ Some contend that Australia had a broom-jumping tradition, but most references are found in secondary sources or novels and are often not substantiated by primary sources. See Grieves 2011; Ihde 1998; Roberts 2000. One primary source does refer to it, but mainly as a children’s game: “Letters on Australia” 1852, 2.

⁶ Although this remains a neglected field, certain works have connected a few of these various groups to each other. See, for example, Williams 2012, on transatlantic friendships between the Welsh and African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For other multicultural comparative analyses, see Brandon 1972; Joyner 1999.

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