When colonists from Europe first arrived in North America in the seventeenth century, they carried their beliefs in magic and the supernatural with them. Deep religious convictions and belief in the power of God often coincided with a fear of witches and evil spirits committed to carrying out the Devil’s work. Magical practices offered a means to exert some control of the unknown and assuage their fears. Although scholars have discussed the significance of magical beliefs and practices, they tend to assume that these dramatically declined with the rapid advance of medical science and the emergence of the modern city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, as early as the 1930s, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski introduced a functionalist interpretation of magic that suggested that “wherever there is danger, uncertainty, great incidence of chance and anxiety, even in entirely modern forms of enterprise, magic crops up” (40). Malinowski noted the prominence of magical services and products in all the large cities of Europe and America. In 1982, anthropologist Phillips Stevens, Jr. argued that beliefs in witchcraft “are timeless and universal, found at all stages of recorded human history and in all societies, and at all levels of society, today” (29). He also noted that a multicultural, ethnic urban environment is especially stressful for immigrants from rural backgrounds. The resulting culture shock sometimes leads not only to a reversion to the magical beliefs of their homeland but also to an intensification of witchcraft beliefs generally. Indeed, some urban merchants not only catered to this market but also encouraged such practices through mass-produced magical paraphernalia and texts. Continuously evolving from place to place and generation to generation to meet the specific needs of practitioners, magical practices represented a means—especially for oppressed individuals—to assert some power and control over their lives (Anderson; Chireau; Fennell; Long).

When African Americans, Southern and Eastern Europeans, and Chinese immigrants migrated to American cities in large numbers in the early twentieth century they encountered a xenophobic and often violent reception born out of a culture of fear. White, predominately Anglo, Protestant Americans, were anxious and afraid of the new arrivals. Their racist beliefs about these non-Anglo “others” and their concerns about the economic competition of a new labor force morphed into discussions about the alleged threats posed by their new neighbors. They frequently pointed to the “superstitions” of these groups as evidence of the cultural and intellectual inferiority of non-Anglo races and the potential dangers they posed to a civilized, Christian society. Missionaries,
teachers, settlement house workers, and doctors feared the varied folk beliefs and practices of these people and vigorously sought to stamp out these beliefs in order to uplift and protect the “less civilized races.” Nevertheless magical practices persisted. The new arrivals, facing a dangerous and unfamiliar environment, found comfort and power through magical beliefs, amulets and protective charms. Apotropaic practices, rather than disappearing through the processes of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization, thrived as a means of coping with the uncertainty that confronted individuals in the often hostile environs of American cities. Magical charms and amulets provided protection against old world threats of witchcraft, demons, and the evil eye and, in the new world, they provided supernatural protection against the very natural threats of poverty, disease, and infant mortality. Magical practices became a means of empowerment in a frightening and powerless situation and especially in protecting that which was most precious to urban families: their children. Over time and through the interaction of ethnic groups within the urban environment, apotropaic practices gained new meanings and sometimes merged with other cultural traditions to create new, cross-cultural magical traditions.

**Children of the Cities**

Children served as important links between past and present, old world and new. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle- and upper-class parents increasingly idealized childhood as a period of innocence. They aimed to protect, nurture, and guide the child while prolonging this delicate stage of life. The shift away from the family economy (where each family contributed financially to the household) deemphasized children’s economic value and redefined children as “priceless” (Macleod 13; Zelizer 81–94). The dangers of the outside world, especially the industrial, urban environment, presented threats to the proper development of the child. Infant and child mortality represented the most immediate threat. In 1901, Census Bureau data revealed a mortality rate of 124.5 per 1,000 for infants under age one and an additional 57.5 for children between the ages of one to five living in selected northern cities. Although diseases such as measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria threatened the lives of young children, developmental, gastrointestinal, and respiratory ailments were the leading causes of death among infants. Children in crowded urban tenements or those lacking proper nutrition remained most at risk. Immigrant and African-American children suffered the highest infant and child mortality rates (Ladd-Taylor 1–19, 28; Macleod 38–40).

Parents knew too well the number of natural and supernatural evils threatening their children. Many diseases mirrored the symptoms traditionally associated with bewitchment. The high infant mortality rates seemed inexplicable unless one considered the potential supernatural origins of illnesses. Belief in the powers of demons, witches, and conjurers to harm young children necessitated a multifaceted defense to ensure their protection. Predominately middle-class progressive reformers recognized the need to address the problem of infant mortality at the same time that they expressed frustration over the high birth rates, unsanitary living conditions, and, in their view, the superstitious child-rearing practices of African Americans and the “new immigrant” (mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia). While some sought to restrict immigration, others focused on educating, uplifting, and assimilating their new neighbors. Some reformers worked to improve the education, living conditions, and play environment for urban children. Meanwhile working-class families in the cities, including African-American and immigrant parents developed new strategies and adapted old traditions to ensure their children’s survival in the urban environment. Despite reformers’ efforts to eliminate the perceived superstitious practices of immigrants and African Americans, protective amulets and charms continued to provide parents with some sense of comfort and feeling of power over their child’s well-being into the late
twentieth century (Ladd-Taylor 19, 79, 87; Brindisi 483–86). Apotropaic beliefs among African Americans, Southern and Eastern European, and Chinese immigrants thrived, with each group adapting these practices to the unique urban environment of early twentieth-century America.

### African Americans and the Great Migration

African slaves carried their magical beliefs from Africa to the plantations of America. African and European magical traditions merged, creating new forms of magical practices by the late nineteenth century. Elements of conjure, Voodoo, European American magic, and Christianity often intertwined. Although Voodoo represented a complete religion with a pantheon of deities, conjure (also known as root-work or hoodoo) involved using substances such as roots, herbs, minerals, animal parts, and other items to bring healing or harm to others. African Americans concerned with improving their relationships or financial situations and ensuring supernatural protection often turned to root-workers. The demand for the services of local hoodoo practitioners encouraged a thriving trade in spiritual products throughout the South and, with the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, in industrial cities throughout the United States. Conjurers created protective amulets known as mojo bags, hands, or gris-gris. These hand-made amulets typically consisted of colored bags filled with various herbs, roots, powders, dirt, bones, and miscellaneous objects depending upon the intended purpose of the charm (Anderson, Chireau, Long).

African Americans, like their European American neighbors, maintained a strong belief in the power of witches and other supernatural evils. The distinction between witches and conjurers blurred although each was believed to have the supernatural power to harm others. Witches were individuals who sold their souls to the devil and could, therefore, perform supernatural feats such as shape-shifting and invisibility. A frequent theme in both European-American and African-American witchcraft tales was the hag who slipped out of her skin at night and snuck through keyholes to engage in nocturnal deviling such as attacking the neighbor’s cattle or riding human victims as if they were horses (Chireau 86–87; Pinckney 76–78). Popular means of ensuring protection against witches mirrored some of the practices of Anglo Americans and included placing a knife under one’s bed or pillow, hanging a sieve from the doorknob, laying a broom across the doorway, hanging a horseshoe above the door, or sprinkling salt, pepper, or mustard seed in one’s shoes, around the bed, or throughout the house. Carrying a rabbit’s foot or horseshoe nail offered additional protection while wearing hats, socks, or clothes inside out also thwarted witches and other evil spirits (Brewster 645–53; Browne 198–89; Cannon 316, 322–24, 379; Davis 132; Hand, Casetta and Thiederman vol. 2, 1074, 1097, 1110; Hand, Frank C. Brown, 107, 123–31; Hyatt “Folk-Lore from Adams County,” 515–45; Hyatt “Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork,” 1481–58, 454, 472–80).

Parents concerned with the physical and spiritual health of their children turned to local root-workers for advice. A common amulet prescribed by knowledgeable conjurers was a coin (usually a silver dime or copper penny) placed in a shoe or tied around the necks, wrists, or ankles of infants and children to protect them from witchcraft and conjure (“All About Hoodoos” 2; Hand, Frank C. Brown, 107, 131; Hand, Casetta and Thiederman vol. 1, 131, 198; Hyatt, Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork, 484–92; Hyatt, Folk-Lore from Adams County, 522; Puckett 314). Folklorists uncovered extensive evidence for this practice through interviews conducted in the early twentieth century. In 1982, archaeologists excavating an African-American cemetery at the Cedar Grove site in Lafayette County, Arkansas uncovered both adult and child African-American burials with coins. In at least two cases the coins were perforated and apparently worn around the neck or attached to the clothing, suggesting an apotropaic function (Rose 61, 75, 116).
Metal, especially iron, silver, and copper, are common prophylactics against evil in many cultures around the world, and the silver dime remained the most popular amulet among African Americans in the early twentieth century.

Frequently, African Americans adopted religious medals, books, and pictures as protective charms or amulets. Many individuals ascribed powerful apotropaic properties to saint medallions, images of Jesus, the Bible, inscriptions of psalms, and German folk magic manuals such as Pow-Wows or Long Lost Friend, The Egyptian Secrets of Albertus Magnus and The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses. Some people copied the seals from The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses, carrying them in a pocket or shoe to protect against conjuration (Chireau 25–26; Davies 195, 214; Hyatt, Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork 643–44; Long 16, 121–22). Parents also used the Bible as a charm by placing it under a child’s pillow at night to prevent bewitchment (Hand, Frank C. Brown, 128, Hyatt, Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork 147–48; Hyatt, Folk-Lore from Adams County 515).

Northern missionaries and teachers descended upon the South following the Civil War in a campaign to “uplift” African Americans through education and religious training especially focused on youths. Reformers often expressed frustration over the tendency of African Americans to appeal to what reformers negatively referred to as “superstitious” practices. Both white and black reformers and advocates of racial uplift seemed to agree that belief in conjure represented an obstacle to progress. City health officers and newspaper editors blamed abnormally high mortality rates among African Americans in Savannah, Georgia in 1915 on unsanitary conditions as well as superstitious beliefs. As the Chicago Defender reported, “Hoodoo workers live and thrive on the sale of their worthless but deadly wares” (“Hoodoo Doctors” 8). Editorials recommended forcing the conjure doctors out of business and adopting new laws to improve the sanitary conditions of the city’s housing. Despite the efforts of reformers to stamp out these superstitions, the practices persisted (Chireau 125, 130–31, 139–44; Long 78, 139–40; Anderson 2, 6, 12, 14, 77).

African Americans migrating to major cities turned to time-tested magical methods of protecting their families. In 1906 the New York Tribune noted the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs among the city’s black population. The author particularly observed the hesitancy of parents to submit their babies to the treatment of doctors in hospitals: “Many of them still cling to curious beliefs in miraculous remedies for all sorts of bodily ills.” Traditional methods to ward off evil spirits, such as the carving of the cross mark on doorposts and the placing of a broomstick across a doorway, persisted (“Many New Yorkers” 8). Amulets also continued to serve important apotropaic functions. Dr. L. E. Orchard, who conducted a study of conjure in northern cities in the late 1890s, noted the thriving trade of local conjurers. Orchard insisted that police officers in the cities reported that about four out of every five African Americans arrested carried charms (“Queer Practises” 25). Belinda Babcock, an African-American woman living in Chicago told newspaper reporters in 1901 that she carried a silver dime and a pinch of salt in the toe of her left shoe to ward off evil (“All About Hoodoos” 2). The police matron of the House of Detention in Washington, DC, also noted the frequent use of amulets by over half of the African-American women committed to the institution. She stated that “fish tails, rattles from rattlesnakes’ tails, eel skins, peculiarly shaped stones or pieces of wood, horse shoe nails, and other things... are carried in small bags worn around the waist or neck or in stockings” (“Voodoo Doctors” 4).

Migration, urbanization, and industrialization fueled the commercialization of hoodoo products and services in the early twentieth century. In 1904, the Washington Times reported that about one hundred “voodoo” doctors or conjurers who worked in the District of Columbia. Spiritual supply companies in major cities such as Chicago, New Orleans, New York, and Philadelphia sold manufactured charms and amulets through newspaper advertisements and mail-order catalogues.
(“Witch Doctors” 5). Commercially produced mojo bags increasingly replaced the hand-made variety. Companies advertised lodestones to carry in pockets and premade hands as ready-to-wear protective amulets (Anderson 14, 115; Chireau 139–44; Davies 238–40; Long 58, 99–100, 139–40; McCall, 365). Religious amulets also proved popular as apotropaic devices. Around 1933, the King Novelty Company marketed a medal embossed with the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which the advertisement insisted was designed to be worn around the neck as a “PROTECTION against Evil and Misfortune and to PROTECT the wearer from Harm.” The Company also offered a St. Anthony Pocket Statuette and stated that “many people who are devoted to St. Anthony and who desire his protection against Demons, Devils, and Evil influences, carry one on their person” (King Curio Catalog #45). In 1944, the Standard O and B Supply Company advertised a crucifix: “Many say, according to legend, that the owner of the Crucifix may sleep well without danger from evil influences, to overcome the arts of witches, sorcerers and those who practice black magic” (“Standard O & B Catalog”). The catalogues likewise advertised a number of cleansing washes, powders, incense, and candles to help ward off evil.

Some parents relied on the advice of conjurers and practiced magic to protect their children from a variety of dangers. African-American children faced high infant mortality rates largely caused by deadly diseases. Discrimination, segregation, and poverty confined them to crowded, unsanitary neighborhoods that exacerbated the health crisis. Even when they gained access to hospitals and medicines, African Americans often turned to conjure. In 1904, an African-American mother living in Washington, DC, sought treatment from medical doctors for her ailing daughter. However, the latest techniques and medicines of modern medical science failed to heal the girl’s tuberculosis. The desperate mother eventually paid a conjurer to diagnose and treat the girl. The root-worker determined that the cause of the child’s suffering was witchcraft and proceeded to treat her through magical means. The alternative treatment also failed, and the daughter passed away shortly thereafter ("Voodoo Doctors" 4).

The continued practice of conjure in the cities reflected a conscious effort on behalf of African-American parents to ensure the survival of their infants against the variety of physical and spiritual menaces that threatened their bodies and souls.

**Southern and Eastern European Americans**

Like African Americans from the South, Southern and Eastern Europeans began settling in large numbers in American cities during the late nineteenth century. They too retained a strong magical tradition, including belief in witchcraft and the evil eye. The concept of the evil eye appears to have originated thousands of years ago in the Mediterranean region and became widespread throughout the Middle East, Europe, and later the Americas with the expansion of Western civilizations. Those who possessed the evil eye had the ability to sicken or kill their victims with a simple glance. Staring at or complimenting a child (sometimes called overlooking) potentially led to evil-eye affliction. Some individuals cursed with the evil eye used their power intentionally, whereas others had no power to control it. The victim most often developed a high fever, headache, fatigue, cramps, stomachache, and sometimes convulsions. Despite a number of folk remedies and cures, most people focused on preventing infection with the evil eye (Georges 69: Hand, Casetta and Thiederman vol. 1, 130–32, Jones 151–52, 158–59, Zaloha 159–61).

In 1914, field workers studying infant mortality for the United States Children’s Bureau recorded the widespread acceptance of witchcraft and evil eye beliefs among European immigrants in Waterbury, Connecticut. They detailed the stories of several women who, in an attempt to understand the death of their infants, blamed witchcraft. However, the reformers could not simply dismiss these as superstitions of an older generation. They noted, for example, that a young American-born
Italian woman, educated in the local public school system, surprised them by insisting on the existence of witches in the United States. The woman explained that “to be a witch a girl baby must be born at midnight at Christmas” (Hunter 76–77). She informed the reformers that charms to ward off witchcraft and the evil eye could be purchased locally from two women who supported themselves through such work, especially by treating babies who had been bewitched.

In the early twentieth century, Dr. Alice Hamilton of Chicago’s Hull House described the widespread belief in witchcraft and the evil eye among the local Italian population. Hamilton detailed the story of a young woman who, distraught over the sudden illness of her husband and child, consulted a local maga (witchwoman) to discover the problem. Family discord resulted when the maga helped the woman determine that her step-sister had bewitched the family. Hamilton tried to intervene on behalf of the step-sister by appealing to the family’s Christian faith and denying the existence of witchcraft. The young Italian woman retorted, “it’s in the bible ... and Protestants like you hold by the Bible” (72). Hamilton concluded that, to the Italian immigrant, the supernatural is “as much a part of the real stuff of life as is his job in the street-cleaning gang, his tenement home, the push-carts and garbage wagons on the street” (75). Although Hull House reformers generally adopted an attitude of cultural acceptance that encouraged the preservation of immigrant traditions, they still felt compelled to stamp out folk practices that they deemed harmful to the health of the immigrant or to the process of Americanization (Ladd-Taylor 79, 87).

To the dismay of reformers, many parents relied on traditional amulets to protect against witchcraft and more visible threats to children’s health. In 1892, Vivia Divers, a student at the Chicago Baptist Missionary Training School, embarked on her home visitations in the Italian quarter. At one residence, Divers was surprised to learn of an Italian folk belief as she picked up the baby dressed in bright red silk hood suit sack: “As I laid my hand on the breast of the sleeping babe I noticed in the folds of the wrapping a pair of steel scissors. I said to the mother, ‘why, what are these for?’ ‘Keep from sick,’ answered she in broken English—‘keep them there, not get sick, all time well’” (Divers 144). Although she did not mention it, the mother probably dressed the baby in red for similar reasons. European immigrants in Cleveland, Ohio, recommended covering a newborn child with a red blanket or shawl to keep evil spirits away when guests came to visit (Hand, Casetta, and Thiederman vol. 1, 137).

Not all outsiders condemned magical beliefs and practices. In 1921, Michael M. Davis, Jr., conducted research on the health and habits of immigrants as part of an Americanization study funded by the Carnegie Corporation. Davis noted the tendency of immigrants to defer to the advice of the local “witchwoman” with regard to questions of health and medicine. Davis also observed the fear of the evil eye among immigrants from the Near East and the persistence of the Italian custom of presenting newborn babies with charms pinned on their clothing. Davis remarked that these customs “are real parts of life. If American workers for health do not know them or understand them, if they take and indifferent or contemptuous attitude toward them, they can neither get the best from, nor give the best to, the people whom they seek to serve” (193–94). Davis advocated an attitude of cooperation in improving the overall health of the American population.

As with African Americans, immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe considered both traditional folk customs and the advice of reformers in developing a treatment plan for their children. Often, the time-tested methods of tradition won out over modern scientific discoveries. Anna Zaloha, a student of sociology and anthropology at Northwestern University, conducted a study of 143 families of Italian descent in Chicago in the 1930s. She found a persistent belief in the idea of the evil eye and a variety of measures to prevent it. One young girl described her experience of becoming sick as a result of the evil eye. Although initially the family did not believe in the evil eye, a neighbor’s diagnosis and cure of the illness converted them into believers. After she recovered,
the neighbor gave her a small pair of scissors to wear for protection. The vast majority of her informants used the verbal charm of “God bless it” after admiring a baby to protect it from being overlooked. Furthermore, Zaloha’s study found that 47% of the families used amulets consisting of gold and a piece of red coral to protect babies against the evil eye. Scissors, knives, or keys were also sometimes placed under the child’s pillow to provide protection (161–64). Other measures employed by families included tying red or black ribbons to the wrists of the infants (Silverman 92).

Besides ribbons and red coral, Southern and Eastern European immigrants utilized a variety of other wearable amulets. Little bags containing garlic and salt were strung around the necks or pinned to the clothing of children. Italian, Greek, Polish, Russian, and Jewish children in major cities such as New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis frequently wore blue beads and amulets in the shape of a horn, a *mano fica* (clenched fist with protruding thumb between second and third fingers), *mano cornuta* (extended first and fourth fingers with second and third fingers enclosed by thumb), a hunchbacked man, fish, or scissors (DiStasi 28; Georges “Greek American Folk Beliefs,” 81–82; Georges, “Matiasma,” 70; Gifford Jr. 58–9; Hand, Casetta and Thiederman vol. 1, 130–32, 136–37; Hand, “The Evil Eye” 175–76; Jones, 153–54; Malpezzi and Clements 121–22; Orsi 3; Yoffie 376).

Religious amulets served to protect children from a variety of ills and evils. Some parents put prayer books next to cribs to provide newborn supernatural protection (Hand, Casetta, and Thiederman vol. 1, 133). Crosses and crucifixes reflected not only Christian faith but belief in the healing and protective powers of the amulet itself. Among Catholics, saint medallions and scapulars were common forms of amulets. As intermediaries between the natural and the supernatural world, saints provided a very real connection to the divine. Individuals prayed to saints for help with specific issues or ailments hoping that the saint would intercede on their behalf (Primeggia 70). Scapulars consisted of two tiny squares of cloth usually depicting an image of the Virgin Mary or a Saint, worn around the neck with one in the center of the chest and the other in the center of the back (McDannell 22-23; Orsi 12, 67, 173–74).

In addition to crosses, crucifixes, saint medallions, and scapulars, other objects of religious significance provided spiritual protection. Some Italian-American children wore bags filled with salt, bits of palm blessed on Palm Sunday, and pictures of saints (Hand, Casetta, and Thiederman vol. 2 1061; Malpezzi and Clements 121–22). Richard Gambino, growing up as late as the midtwentieth century in New York City, remembered Italian children wearing amulets with pictures of saints, Christian fish, scissors, daggers, teeth, claws, and horns strung around their necks or pinned to their undershirts. Although Gambino wore only a small gold crucifix, his grandmother would pin additional amulets consisting of little sacks filled with paper to his clothing for added protection (Gambino 200). The paper may have included a written prayer or transcription from a holy book (Yoffie 376). Greek Philadelphians often adorned the children with amulets either strung from their neck in the form of a cross or in the form of a little bag with religious objects and written incantations pinned to the inside of their clothing (Gizelis 32–35).

In addition to amulets, a variety of other means were employed to protect against evil. The muttering of verbal charms (“God bless you” or “may you not get the evil eye”) and gestures in the form of the *mano fica* and *mano cornuta* could thwart the evil eye just before or after suspected infection. Spitting on or near the potential victim provided another means of warding off the evil eye. Many eastern Europeans also believed in protecting everyone in the household by hanging horseshoes or sprinkling salt. The placement of sharp objects such as knives, scissors, or axes under the bed or near a sleeping baby provided additional spiritual protection (DiStasi, 25–26, 43–44; Gifford, Jr. 59; Georges, 82, 86; Hand, Casetta, and Thiederman vol. 1 130–33, vol. 2 1070–71, 1111; Hyatt, *Folk-Lore from Adams County*, 527; Jones 154; Yoffie 377; Zahola 163).
As the evidence suggests, Southern and Eastern European immigrants often went to great lengths to shield their families from disease caused by natural means or supernatural bewitchment. Popular opinion derided these “new” immigrants as dangerous threats to the political, economic, and social order. Their children seemingly represented sources of moral and physical contagion to the children of native-born, white, middle-class families. Efforts to restrict the immigration and confine the new immigrants to segregated neighborhoods met with popular approval. Not surprisingly, then, these immigrants attempted to protect themselves against nativist violence through magical means. The best example comes from the industrialized West. In the early 1920s, Greek children in Carbon County, Utah, not only wore amulets to keep off the evil eye but to also protect against attacks by the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK, seeking to drive out the economic competition, represented by the new immigrant working in the coal mines, targeted the local Greek and Italian communities through vandalism and threats of violence. Greek mothers responded by pinning additional amulets to their children’s clothing and placing others under their pillow (Papanikolas 68–9). Old-world apotropaic practices thus endured and took on new meaning in the new world.

**Chinese Americans**

Chinese immigrants from the Guangdong province of Southeastern China carried many of their supernatural beliefs and practices with them to American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A belief in potentially dangerous supernatural spirits had a long history in Chinese culture. Failure to provide for the souls of the deceased through proper burial and offerings of food, clothing, money, and incense could result in a discontented ghost-spirit who would return in the form of a demon to wreak havoc in the lives of the living. Similarly, individuals who died under violent or unfavorable circumstances (without any spouse or child to care for them, for example) would likely return to harm their relatives. Sometimes the ghost-spirits of young, unwed girls were believed to return in the form of soul-stealing demons to claim a soul of a baby boy in order to be reborn into the earthly realm. Children were most susceptible to attack in the first one hundred days after birth, although the safety of the child was a great concern through the first one thousand days. Parents therefore sought magical means to protect their children especially from these soul-stealing demons (Cohen 187-91; Dore 22; Saari 13–14; Watson, 207).

In addition to the threats of demonic ghost-spirits, living humans could also curse or bewitch a child, causing illness or death (Doolittle 318). In 1897, Sui Seen Far, a prolific writer of both Chinese and European heritage, noted the persistent concern that Chinese-American parents expressed for the physical and spiritual well-being of their babies. The Chinese mother “dresses him in Chinese dress, shaves his head and strings amulets on his neck, wrists and ankles. She is very superstitious with regard to her child, and should you happen to know the date and hour of his birth, she begs with tears that you will not tell, for should some enemy know, he or she may cast a horoscope which would make the child’s life unfortunate” (64). A common belief held that the stare or touch of a stranger possessed the power to bring illness to a child. A folktale collected in California during the 1930s told the story of a baby boy who became ill after a stranger touched his feet. His mother, in an effort to deceive the soul-stealing demons and counter the curse of the stranger, immediately renamed him—calling him by a girl’s name. After many years the boy regained his health (Lee 196). Chinese immigrants in America remained weary of the threats posed by human sorcerers and demonic ghost-spirits, especially with regard to the delicate lives of their children.

Chinese parents frequently made or purchased amulets and charms to protect their children from the various natural and supernatural dangers that threatened them. As with some European immigrants, the color red was considered effective
at deterring evil spirits. Silver, gold, and jade amulets were strung around the necks, wrists, and ankles of infants and young children brought good luck and warded off evil. Amulets in the shape of padlocks ensured protection from soul-stealing demons by binding the child’s body and soul. Parents sometimes disguised boy children as girls or animals to deceive demons into believing that the child’s life was worthless. Metal neck rings resembling a dog’s collar served a dual purpose, disguising the child as a dog while also firmly securing the child’s soul to the earthly realm (Doolittle 308; Dore 11–15; Garrett 181–88; Lee 9–10; Morgan 133–34; A. McLeod 268–69; Saari 13–14).

Other amulets reflected similar apotropaic functions while asserting wealth and status or the desire for future material success. A photograph from the Roy D. Graves collection at the Bancroft Library shows a Chinese American boy in San Francisco wearing a prominent silver pendant around his neck representing Shou Xing (God of longevity and old age) riding a qilin. The qilin was a mythical beast—with the body of a deer, the head of a dragon, and the tail of a lion—believed to have great wisdom (“Chinese Child”). Families frequently purchased pendants featuring Shou Xing and the qilin or amulets in the shape of bells, peaches, or locks. The use of these amulets in China and America not only reflected the desire to protect children from malevolent soul-stealing ghost-spirits and to secure the overall material well-being of the child (Lin and Lin 48; Lee 9–10; A. McLeod 268–69; Williams 315–16).

Embroidered patterns and designs on Chinese children’s hats and clothing served similar protective purposes. Images of dogs, pigs, tigers, and dragons sewn into children’s collars, shoes, and hats allegedly deceived evil spirits into believing that the child was not human while also invoking the power of these animals in ensuring the physical and spiritual safety of the child. Images of propitious plants or symbols reflected a desire that the child’s life be long and happy. Some mothers added decorative features such as red string, tassels, pom-poms, and bells to distract or repel evil spirits. Shortly after a child’s birth, mothers occasionally sewed multicolored “hundred families” style aprons, collars, and jackets from silk pieces collected from well-wishers. The “hundred families” clothing supposedly attracted the good fortune of “a hundred different families” in assuring the health and future success of the infant (Dore 21; Garrett 181; Lin and Lin).

The significance of these amulets and charms among Chinese Americans was perhaps best articulated at the 1882 one-month celebration feast of Lee Ah Chuck in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Lee Ah You, a prominent San Francisco merchant, celebrated the birth of his son by inviting over three hundred family and friends to the traditional Chinese full-moon ceremony that officially welcomed a newborn to the world. A reporter from the San Francisco Morning Call described the clothing and accouterments of the guest of honor:

[he] was clothed in a long carmine silk robe, over which was a heavily padded, sleeveless jacket of the same material, but of a lighter shade, and over this he wore a red calico bib. Around his neck was suspended a heavy gold chain, on which hung a peculiarly shaped figure of gold, which the father gave the company to understand is a representation of a warrior seated astride of a lion. This he said was a gift from the members of the company at the grand Chinese theater, and that if worn by the babe as a charm would render him strong and valiant. On the child’s head was a red silk cap, on the border of which was sewed a number of golden figures an inch high, representing various gods, the attributes of which the boy, it is thought will have when he reaches the age of manhood. The most prominent of these was the representation of the god of longevity, and was placed on the cap by the donor with the hope that the boy may live to be as old as the god the figure represents. (“A Chinese Christening” 2)

The amulet, probably a qilin, strung around the boy’s neck and the variety of charms sewn onto the child’s hat and clothing reflected not only a concern with the child’s physical safety but also a desire for future success. Although the exact meaning of these charms and amulets no doubt varied from individual to individual and changed with distance and time, this is a rare instance that evidences of the use of amulets coupled with an expression of their intended meaning according to its user.

In addition to counteracting supernatural demons and human sorcerers, amulets and
charms represented a means of overcoming natural obstructions to the physical well-being and material success of Chinese children in the United States. Lee Ah You’s desire that his son be “strong and valiant” is especially important given the impediments hindering his son’s socio-economic mobility. Anti-Chinese sentiment against the perceived economic and moral threat of the Chinese immigrant led to demands for immigration restriction. The success of anti-Chinese politicians and labor leaders culminated in severe Chinese exclusion laws that erected substantial barriers to immigration from China between 1882 and 1943. The restrictions limited the formation of Chinese families. Children, therefore, were rare in Chinese American communities during the exclusion era. The few Chinese children living in American cities, especially on the West Coast, experienced segregation in housing, in schools, on the playground, and in the work force. Like their African American and Southern and Eastern European neighbors, Chinese children lived in crowded, filthy tenement buildings within ethnic slums that offered limited access to quality healthcare. Infant mortality rates among Chinese children were frequently higher than the local white population. Because Chinese children were so rare and vulnerable, Chinese parents went to great lengths to ensure the survival of their precious progeny. Magical practices, in the form of apotropaic objects, represented one potential path out of poverty and obscurity.

Recasting Magic

Although African-American, European-American, and Chinese-American magical traditions persisted in American cities, the meaning that individuals ascribed to these practices changed substantially over time. Through the process of Americanization, some immigrants rejected the use of amulets as evidence of their willingness to assimilate into American society by abandoning what were perceived as old world “superstitions.” Others simply avoided outward displays of their traditional beliefs or adopted a mixture of faith-based and scientific approaches to healing. One Romanian American observed that many parents continued the custom of protecting their children against the evil eye with a red ribbon by hiding the ribbon underneath the child’s clothing to avoid being labeled as superstitious (Thigpen 140).

Even as infant and child mortality rates declined, amulets and charms remained popular as symbols of ethnic identity (Malpezzi and Clements 118). Richard Swiderski has analyzed the mass production and marketing of plastic evil-eye charms for Italians living in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Swiderski suggested that the manufacture of cheap, plastic charms and the creation of completely new hybrid forms of amulets represent a generalization of beliefs that reflects “a fundamental change in beliefs about the evil eye. They are material evidence of a shift in supernatural ideology that marks the acculturation of Italians in America” (30). Swiderski insisted that the amulets lost their association with the evil eye and became symbols of Italian-American identity. People openly and proudly displayed their amulets and charms as signs of their ethnic pride.

Still amulets and charms did not completely lose their apotropaic functions as the traditions of various ethnic groups blended in America. Scholars have examined the convergence of African-American and European beliefs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Anderson; Chireau; Fennell; Long). An intermingling of diverse magical traditions also occurred in American cities in the early twentieth century. A reporter for the Washington Times in 1907 noted the thriving business of local African-American conjure doctors: “Many white people and not a few of the cultured and wealthy in this city pass the thresholds of these colored magic-workers to help them surmount obstacles and to get advice in love affairs and business undertakings” (“Witch Doctors” 5). In the 1930s, Harry Middleton Hyatt in his extensive survey of conjure practices in Adams County, Illinois, recorded examples of German Americans
consulting African-American conjurers for assistance in warding off witches and countering hexes (Hyatt 520–21). The proximity of ethnic groups within the boundaries of the city and the advertisement of spiritual services in the newspapers facilitated these types of cross-cultural interactions.

The blending of magical traditions is especially evident through the commercialization of spiritual supplies. The catalogues of the leading companies advertised a broad assortment of goods to appeal to the widest audience. The Chicago-based L.W. DeLaurence Company sold an array of items representing European, Far Eastern, Jewish, and African-American magical beliefs. Jewish immigrants owned and operated many of the spiritual supply stores that catered specifically to African-American clients. However, the ethnicity of the storeowners and the clients was generally quite diverse (Anderson, 118–19; Chireau, 141–42; Long 156). Spiritual entrepreneurs discovered that the blending of traditions broadened popular appeal for their products. Mass marketing of such spiritual supplies continues today.

Traditional magical practices from Asia, Europe, and Africa merged, evolved, and incorporated elements of the old with the new as immigrants adapted to the unique context of urban America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Amulets and charms served an important function for parents who feared for their children and the dangers that they faced. They sought to exercise some control over a generally uncontrollable situation. Apotropaic practices therefore thrived as a means of coping with the poverty, disease, and violence confronting immigrants packed into urban ethnic slums. Progressive reformers expressed concern over the reliance on “archaic” customs and introduced new “scientific” techniques and ideas. In the face of modern medicine and technology, traditional amulets and charms sometimes acquired new meaning, ceasing to function primarily as apotropaic devices. Indeed, amulets increasingly served as generalized symbols of good luck and markers of ethnic identity. However, as Jeffrey Anderson has pointed out, the popularity of modern day psychics and spiritual advisors reflects the continued importance of magical beliefs and practices. Numerous spiritual supply stores exist in all the major cities. They have taken their wares to the Internet where they conduct a thriving business in twenty-first-century style. These companies market a diverse array of amulets and charms representing both traditional symbols, like the Italian horn and the Chinese longevity lock, and more modern designs. The association with witchcraft, demons, and the evil eye has generally declined. Most people now purchase these as general good luck amulets. The belief in the magical efficacy of such amulets and charms has not completely disappeared, however. As long as fear, danger, death, and uncertainty remain, it probably never will.

Works Cited


*King Curio Catalog #45.* Chicago: Circa 1933. Web.


From the era of Reconstruction to the end of the 19th century, the United States underwent an economic transformation marked by the maturing of the industrial economy, the rapid expansion of big business, the development of large-scale agriculture, and the rise of national labor unions and industrial conflict. An outburst of technological innovation in the late 19th century fueled this headlong economic growth. However, the accompanying rise of the American corporation and the advent of big business resulted in a concentration of the nation's productive capacities in fewer and childâ€™s world in Stevensonâ€™s Garden of Verses, the satirical nonsense of Hilaire Belloc in his The Bad Childâ€™s Book of Beasts (1896), the incantatory, other-worldly magic of Walter de la Mare with his Songs of Childhood (1902) and Peacock Pie (1913), the fertile gay invention of Eleanor Farjeon, and the irresistible charm of.Â Kullman is also a historical novelist. The prolific Edith Unnerstad has written charming family stories, with a touch of fantasy, as has Karin Anckarsvärd, whose Doktorns pojkâ€™ (1963; Eng. trans., Doctorâ€™s Boy, 1965) is a quietly moving tale of small-town life in the horse-and-buggy days. The Sandbergs, Inger and Lasse, have advanced the Beskow tradition in a series of lovely picture books.