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# Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life<sup>1</sup>

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KENNETH M. BILBY AND JEROME S. HANDLER

## Abstract

*Obeah encompasses a wide variety of beliefs and practices involving the control or channelling of supernatural/spiritual forces, usually for socially beneficial ends such as treating illness, bringing good fortune, protecting against harm, and avenging wrongs. Although obeah was sometimes used to harm others, Europeans during the slave period distorted its positive role in the lives of many enslaved persons. In post-emancipation times, colonial officials, local white elites and their ideological allies exaggerated the antisocial dimensions of obeah, minimizing or ignoring its positive functions. This negative interpretation became so deeply ingrained that many West Indians accept it to varying degrees today, although the positive attributes of obeah are still acknowledged in most parts of the anglophone Caribbean.*

The word *obeah* found across the anglophone Caribbean is probably one of the most widely known African-derived terms in the region.<sup>2</sup> However, there is little consensus among scholars on its meaning and significance, although many conceptions of obeah, both in the past and in more recent years, stress its antisocial and evil nature as witchcraft or sorcery. Indeed, the *term* obeah has come to be endowed with a malevolent/malign social power – much like the “bad words” (swear words) which can lead to legal sanctions if publicly uttered in Jamaica or other West Indian societies.

Obeah is not an organized religion. It lacks a more or less unified system of beliefs and practices involving, for example, deities or gods, communal or public rituals and ceremonies and the physical spaces or sites where they occur, or spiritual leaders of congregations/congregants, as in Haitian Vodun/Voodoo, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería, or

the Orisha religion (formerly known as Shango) in Trinidad. Rather, obeah is a catch-all term that encompasses a wide variety and range of beliefs and practices related to the control or channelling of supernatural/spiritual forces by particular individuals or groups for their own needs, or on behalf of clients who come for help. Originally, on the seventeenth-century slave plantations of the British Caribbean, these beliefs and practices drew on a number of common and broadly related African models or belief systems, including sacred traditions and medical knowledge, modified over the years by the New World environment, including its plant and animal life; European practices, beliefs and material culture (e.g., glass bottles, rum); and the social conditions and community tensions that existed under slavery.

Although the specific beliefs and practices embraced by this term varied from place to place, obeah everywhere shared at least two fundamental characteristics: (1) its practice involved the manipulation and control of supernatural forces, usually through the use of material objects and recitation of spells; and (2) it was primarily concerned with divination (e.g., foretelling, finding lost or stolen goods, ascertaining the cause of illness), healing and bringing good fortune, and protection from harm – although it was sometimes used malevolently to harm others. The practice of obeah usually involved specialists, often skilled in the use of plant medicines, who were sometimes paid fees by individual clients. The practitioners as well as their clients could be men or women. Until fairly recent times, obeah practitioners were not uncommon in most of the anglophone Caribbean, and generally practised their art clandestinely because of wider societal disapproval or prohibitive laws that existed for much of the colonial period.

Perhaps it will help to arrive at a clearer understanding of this highly charged word if its meaning is examined in one specific Afro-Caribbean setting. Since it is generally agreed that the term obeah and its primary referents are of African origin (see below) we start by considering a Caribbean region known for displaying a particularly high degree of African cultural influences. No area fits this description better than the interiors of Suriname and French Guiana, where present-day Maroons maintain semi-autonomous, so-called "tribal" societies. Their enslaved ancestors escaped from coastal plantations into the interior forests during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and founded societies beyond the reach of their enslavers. At present, among the Aluku (Boni) of French Guiana, where Bilby has conducted over three years of

fieldwork during the 1980s and 1990s, the word *obia* has several meanings, the most common being "medicine, remedy or healing power". For the Ndyuka Maroons of Suriname, the term obeah, the historian Silvia de Groot wrote over 30 years ago, refers to a "supernatural force with healing and protecting magic power". Virtually all other reliable sources on the Surinamese Maroons, including the Saramaka, agree with this definition of obeah as a positive form of power that plays an important role in everyday life. Ndyuka and Saramaka oral historians say that it has always been so: that they and their ancestors have always known obeah as a socially beneficial force. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dutch colonial archival sources lend them support. One of the remarkable things about these documentary sources, sketchy as they often are, is that the word *obia*, as used in the documents, rarely if ever denotes malevolent sorcery meant to inflict harm.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Surinamese Maroons – not only the most culturally African of Caribbean populations, but also the most successful at resisting the imposition of European colonial values – define obeah as "healing and protective power" raises questions about the most common meanings given the term in other parts of the region. Is obeah an "overpowering and extremely evil" form of "sorcery and witchcraft", as the most recent edition of the influential *Encyclopaedia Britannica* would have it? Is it "a kind of pretended sorcery or witchcraft", so defined until very recently by the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*?<sup>4</sup> Or is it a kind of "healing and protecting magic power", as Maroons in Suriname will tell you? The "truth", perhaps, lies somewhere in between, and must be sought in the complex and convoluted history of slavery and colonialism in the anglophone Caribbean and how these have shaped both thought and language in the region.

We contend that in many, if not most, parts of the anglophone Caribbean the supernatural/spiritual force (or forces) that the obeah practitioner attempted to control or guide was essentially neutral, but was largely directed toward what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals. The force could even be directed against slave masters, which, from the perspective of many enslaved persons, was a beneficial goal. True, obeah could also have negative or antisocial dimensions. However, the entirely negative view of obeah promulgated by Whites during the period of slavery in the British Caribbean – a view no doubt influenced by the fact that it was sometimes directed against them – has distorted understandings of the social role that obeah played

in the lives of many enslaved West Indians and their descendants in post-emancipation times.<sup>5</sup>

It is hardly surprising that obeah, when filtered through a colonialist and racist lens through documentary evidence, should be seen in exclusively negative terms. European interpretations of obeah were shaped not only by their racist ideologies, ethnocentric religious beliefs, and their own cultural perceptions of witchcraft and sorcery, but also by the limited opportunities they had to gain information. Very few Europeans during the slave era (any more than most modern field workers and scholars) actually witnessed the work of obeah practitioners, and such Europeans rarely left accounts of their observations.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, because of their powers obeah practitioners had considerable spiritual and political influence in slave communities. Obeah could be used as a mechanism of social control. It could become a vehicle through which tensions and antagonisms were channelled and manifested in slave communities, for example, when enslaved persons believed they were bewitched and their lives threatened; and, thus, ultimately it could threaten the stability of colonial and plantocratic authority.<sup>7</sup> Also, because the power of obeah practitioners could be used against Whites, Europeans in the West Indies constructed a narrow and thoroughly negative theory of obeah, reducing it to a kind of virulent witchcraft, augmented by the administration of poisons.<sup>8</sup> So deeply ingrained did this interpretation of obeah become that many West Indians accept it to varying degrees today, although with perhaps diminishing intensity in recent decades.

Our challenge to conventional understandings of obeah is, of course, not entirely new. Almost fifty years ago, Philip Curtin perceptively recognized what many twentieth-century scholars and other writers have ignored. Writing about Jamaica, yet in a comment that could easily be applied to other West Indian areas, Curtin observed that "essentially, obeah was neither good nor bad: it could be used either way". Some years later Edward Kamau Brathwaite departed even further from most scholarly interpretations when he asserted that "obeah . . . is an aspect of [healing and protection], though it has come to be regarded in the New World and in colonial Africa as sorcery and 'black magic'." "The principle of obeah", he continued, is "the process of healing/protection through seeking out the source or explanation of the cause . . . of the disease or fear. This was debased by slave master/missionary/prospero into an assumption, inherited by most of us, that obeah deals in evil."<sup>9</sup>

Although some recent scholars have emphasized, to one degree or another, the socially positive aspects of obeah during the slave period,<sup>10</sup> historical scholarship has traditionally stressed its antisocial dimensions, relying too heavily, we believe, on the Eurocentric and racist perspectives of the primary sources, or on secondary sources that convey this position. For example, in his influential *Sociology of Slavery*, Orlando Patterson wrote, "obeah was essentially a type of sorcery which largely involved harming others at the request of clients". For the cultural geographer David Watts, in his monumental *The West Indies*, "obeah was a type of sorcery or witchcraft, which may be broadly equated with West African 'bad medicine'." David Lowenthal, in his now classic cultural geography of the West Indies, gives a definition that briefly, but assuredly, states: "obeah manipulates evil spirits through black magic". Albert Raboteau, in his widely quoted study of North America, *Slave Religion*, defines obeah as the "use of magic for evil"; and for Philip Morgan, in his masterly and highly regarded study of slave culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Carolinas, "sorcery is the deliberate attempt by an individual to harm others by secretive means. . . . The most common term [among enslaved persons in North America] for sorcery was obi or obia".<sup>11</sup>

Many of the negative assumptions in the scholarly literature about obeah can be traced ultimately to the writings of Joseph J. Williams, a Jesuit missionary and anthropologist, whose work, though now largely forgotten, was influential during the 1930s. In his 1932 volume, *Voodoo and Obeahs*, and a number of other writings, Williams, relying almost entirely on Jamaican sources, including the classic works of Edward Long (*History of Jamaica*, 1774) and Bryan Edwards (*History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 1793), presented a theory of obeah that saw it as a transplanted form of Asante (Ashanti) witchcraft that continued to be opposed in the Caribbean by a kind of "white" or positive power known as "myal". Though based on the flimsiest of evidence, and a naïve and prejudicial reading of eighteenth-century sources, this interpretation is still widely and uncritically accepted. Williams' views have also profoundly affected the search for the etymological roots of the term (see below).<sup>12</sup>

Although the historical evidence and primary sources for discussions of obeah in early West Indian slave societies are often very ambiguous, limited and fragmentary, not to mention highly racist and ethnocentric, they nonetheless offer clues as to the relationship between obeah and

its socially beneficial functions. Indeed, the very primary sources that provide information on obeah and emphasize its evil nature commonly indicate, albeit indirectly or implicitly, its positive role in slave communities. Witness, for example, a major 1781 Jamaican slave law. Its forty-ninth clause specifically addressed "the wicked art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah men and women, pretending to have communication with the Devil and other evil spirits". The law observed how "the weak and superstitious *are deluded into a belief of their [the Obeah practitioners] having full power to exempt them whilst under their protection, from any evils that might otherwise happen*" (our italics).<sup>13</sup> Another example comes from a 1789 document based on slave testimony, one of the earliest Jamaican sources on obeah, and one of the most detailed of the eighteenth century. From this document we learn that the powers known by that name among enslaved persons, though they certainly could be associated with fear and intimidation, had a clearly positive side. We are told, for instance, that enslaved persons may "revere" (and therefore "consult") the obeah man or woman. We learn, furthermore, that they put great faith in his or her divinatory capabilities (or "oracles"), which they consult "upon all occasions". What they desired from the obeah man was not just vengeance against enemies or punishment of thieves – objectives that are perhaps not wholly "evil" or morally indefensible, after all – but "the cure of disorders", "the conciliation of favours", and "the prediction of future events".<sup>14</sup> Clearly, the use of spiritual or magical powers for purposes such as these constitutes something other than malevolent sorcery.

Elsa Goveia reported that in the British Leeward Islands during the late eighteenth century "Obeah practices included not only the preparation of phials and spells which were designed to protect the possessor and his property or to inflict harm on his enemies", but also the treatment of disease and the ability to foresee events. In fact, quite pointedly, the agent for St Kitts in 1788 testified to a parliamentary committee that slaves used obeah ". . . for the protection of their persons and provision grounds, hogs, poultry, etc. and often imagine they are obeahed or bewitched". Obeah practitioners, the agent observed, "from their skill in simples, and the virtues of plants, they sometimes operate extraordinary cures in diseases which have baffled the skill of regular practitioners and more especially in foul sores and ulcers".<sup>15</sup>

An examination of the primary sources for Barbados is also particularly instructive, for this was one of Britain's earliest colonies to depend

on African slave labour. The earliest unambiguous reference to obeah in the British Caribbean of which we are aware occurs in a Barbadian source.<sup>16</sup> Obeah is mentioned in several letters written between November 1710 and September 1712 by Thomas Walduck, an English army officer stationed on the island, to a correspondent in London. Walduck wrote that "one Negro can bewitch another (Obia as they call it)" and "that one (Obia) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our country folk doe in England". "I have knowne", he also wrote, "upon Negroes complaining that they are bewitched, an Obia Negro hath taken out of their eyes bones, shells out of their thighs". In 1729 Arthur Holt, the Anglican rector of Christ Church parish, reported on "their Oby Negroes, or conjurers", and their influence within the slave community. The knowledgeable Griffith Hughes, also an Anglican minister who was based in Barbados during the 1730s and 1740s, succinctly observed that slaves stood "much in awe of . . . obeah Negroes . . . these being a sort of physicians and conjurers, who can, as they believe, not only fascinate them [i.e., bewitch or lay them under a spell], but cure them when they are bewitched by others". In fact, Hughes unintentionally provides another excellent, but not atypical, illustration of how the very primary sources that condemn, mock or otherwise deride obeah provide data that yield an alternative interpretation and indicate the positive role of obeah in slave life. To illustrate the devious influence and chicanery of obeah practitioners and the gullibility of their patients, Hughes described a practitioner who attempted to cure a "Negro woman" who came to him troubled by "rheumatic pains". The woman was "persuaded by one of these Obeah doctors, that she was bewitched", and that he would cure her for a fee. Hughes then describes how the obeah man proceeded to effect the cure he had promised. Several decades after Hughes wrote, a prominent Barbadian planter, John Brathwaite, asserted that obeah practitioners "act now principally as fortune-tellers [i.e., diviners]. Some of them have knowledge in simples [herbal medicines], and can apply them with success in the cure of wounds".<sup>17</sup>

Thus, despite the negative view of obeah and its practitioners emphasized in the primary sources, a critical reading of these sources strongly indicates that obeah practitioners, some of whom may have been identified as "Negro doctors" at certain periods, played positive roles within the slave community. They were sought after for their divination abilities, proficiency at diagnosing and healing illness, skill in finding missing property, and powers to help avenge wrongs, *including those*

inflicted by slave masters. Very importantly, enslaved persons consulted obeah practitioners to protect them, in the words of Barbados's earliest anti-obeah law (the phrasing of which was taken directly from the 1781 Jamaican anti-obeah law), "from any evils that might otherwise happen". Obeah practitioners, like African medicine men, prepared charms or amulets that could protect against illness or harm, ward off evil, bring good luck, or protect against theft of crops or personal belongings. Obeah people could counter the effects of sorcery/witchcraft, perhaps even immunize their clients against these evil practices, and cure the physical disorders and psychological states or moods intimately linked to beliefs in witchcraft/sorcery. Not all obeah people could do all of the above, and different practitioners may have specialized in one or more functions – as also occurs in West Africa.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to deny that the descriptions of contemporary white observers had some basis in fact. Obeah practitioners were sometimes suspected, as these writers grasped, of using their powers to harm others. The social tensions and pressures within slave communities could make these communities particularly susceptible to witchcraft accusations, as was not uncommon in African societies. Fear, although probably not on as massive a scale as Whites claimed, must have played a role in the influence held by some obeah practitioners. In this sense, the belief systems of which obeah was a part would have conformed to a more general pattern found in many folk or traditional healing systems. Since such systems often involve "considerable management of supernatural forces", a widespread, albeit realistic, fear exists that healers who are able to control supernatural forces through their own private efforts could use these forces for antisocial as well as helpful purposes.<sup>19</sup> That is, a widespread characteristic of healers in the medical systems of Caribbean slave communities (as well as in pre-colonial Africa) was that the person who knew how to cure illness could also cause illness. Yet, although certain obeah practitioners were believed capable of seriously injuring people or causing their deaths, it must be stressed that these same practitioners could just as easily make people feel better by neutralizing spells believed to have been cast by those who wished them harm. Such a person could exert great power in his community.<sup>20</sup> Given such beliefs, the spiritual power of some obeah practitioners could be translated into political leadership and resistance to, or aggression against, white authority – surely one major reason Whites found obeah so objectionable and threatening. Throughout the West Indies, obeah

men were alleged to have played prominent roles in slave revolts and conspiracies, and, especially in the earlier periods, those dominated by Akan speakers from the Gold Coast.<sup>21</sup>

Although there is little information on the specific influences that obeah people had in particular plantation communities or settlements, it is doubtful that their influence was based solely on intimidation and fear, as contemporary white writers often claimed, any more than obeah was a system that was entirely or primarily antisocial, as plantation authorities and Whites in general almost universally believed. The evidence suggests that as time passed Whites greatly exaggerated the antisocial dimensions of obeah and increasingly minimized or totally ignored its positive functions during the slave period and, later, in the post-emancipation period.

Indeed, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, when missionary Christianity began to have a major impact in the British Caribbean and when talk of the abolition of the slave trade and general slave emancipation intensified, Whites increasingly emphasized the "evil characteristics" of obeah. They stressed that it was used, in the words of a Barbadian white Creole, to summon up images of "diabolical superstitions", and related "odious rites" and practices that allegedly involved "communication with the devil and other evil spirits". The "harmless prejudices [of slaves] should be respected", recommended a group of "progressive" Barbadian planters in 1812, "but the abominable superstition of obeah . . . should be depressed as much as possible".<sup>22</sup> Obeah became a felony punishable by death or transportation and was viewed as a monolithic form of sorcery or "black magic". In Jamaica, writers described it as a "potent and irresistible spell, withering and palsyng, by undescribable terrors . . . the unhappy victim", and "little more than the superstitious dread of power of certain men, who are supposed capable of injuring others by certain preparations". It was represented as a "species of witchcraft" that was "dark", "barbarous", and "disgusting", and was "accompanied by all the terrors that the dread of a malignant being and the fear of unknown could invest", as a "system founded on the imaginary influence of malignant spirits". Obeah practitioners were considered the "agents of the evil spirit [who] sent disaster, disease, and death".<sup>23</sup>

The peculiarly zealous tone of these negative attributions and characterizations, which appeared with increasing frequency in primary sources later in the nineteenth century, reflected a kind of paradigm

shift, which had been effected, though with greatly varying degrees of success, among the evangelized masses following emancipation in 1834 to 1838. Now many of the descendants of the enslaved peoples themselves spoke of obeah in thoroughly negative terms, though not always with the fervour of Thomas Banbury, a black Jamaican minister, who in 1895 published a diatribe against obeah, which he condemned as "wicked", "immoral", "disgusting", and "debasing", "a superstition the most cruel in its intended designs; the most filthy in its practices; the most shameful and degrading in its associations".<sup>24</sup>

Such views of obeah (with Jamaica being often used as the model for the West Indies in general) infused themselves into the scholarly literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One writer in an 1893 issue of a London-based anthropological/folklore journal, deriving her information from an inspector in the Jamaican police force, reported how various Jamaican laws had suppressed the practice of obeah but prosecutions continued "up to the present day". "So the fangs of the Obeah-man have been drawn", she wrote, "and cases of murder are rare, but he still exercises an evil and wide-spreading influence." Austin Clark, on the staff of the United States National Museum (the Smithsonian), published a research note in the *American Anthropologist* in 1912 under the sensationalist title "An ingenious method of causing death employed by the Obeah men of the West Indies", giving expression to the conventional views of the day. The folklorist/ethnographer Martha Beckwith, who, over four summers of fieldwork (from 1919 to 1924), made the first attempt at a serious study of obeah among Jamaican peasants, concluded that "obeah is the religion of the shadow world, the religion of fear, suspicion, and revenge".<sup>25</sup> There are many examples of negative characterizations in the scholarly literature of the post World-War II era,<sup>26</sup> but it should be stressed that such literature also often provides implicit or direct evidence that Jamaicans sought obeah practitioners for socially beneficial ends. Perhaps even more interesting than meanings given by scholars are the capsule definitions sometimes provided in literature intended for more general audiences. These are usually based on scholarly sources, such as those cited above (which themselves depend heavily on biased eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources) and distil obeah to a few essential terms, such as "witchcraft", "a type of negative sympathetic magic", "the Jamaican form of African black magic", or "the obeahman is usually involved in witchcraft and evil doings for clients to satisfy their selfish needs".<sup>27</sup> Keith Patchett,

a British-born former dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of the West Indies (Cave Hill), inheriting his views from earlier writers and his reliance on phraseology in West Indian criminal law in general, bluntly concluded that obeah throughout the West Indies is "a social evil which is both unchristian and immoral".<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly, in view of the hegemonic forces at play and the nature of colonial society, conceptions of obeah that represented it as evil eventually became the basis for inquiries into the derivation and original meaning of the term. Since obeah is so frequently characterized as the use of power to cause harm, etymologists equipped with bilingual dictionaries have sought, and managed to find, words in various African languages glossed as "witchcraft", "sorcery", "black magic" and the like that bear some resemblance to this Caribbean term. Once such a proposed etymology becomes widely accepted – as has *obayi-fo*, an Asante-Twi term for evil witches – this is then seen, by a kind of circular logic, as lending further support to the notion that obeah, in essence, is a form of sorcery or witchcraft. This trend in modern scholarship can be traced back to Joseph Williams, the aforementioned Jesuit priest and anthropologist. Directly or indirectly (particularly through Orlando Patterson, who offered a slightly modified etymology), Williams' etymological speculations have influenced virtually all modern writers who address the origin of the term and accept that its roots are of Asante-Twi origins. Patterson, who accepted Williams' basic assumptions about Asante-Twi origins, continues to be widely cited by scholars today.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, we believe that a convincing argument can be made, as we have attempted to do in a recent article, that the word obeah is most likely derived not from a word denoting harmful power, such as *obayi-fo*, but from another African term (or terms) with entirely positive or, at least, neutral meanings. We argue that the term obeah probably derived from Igbo or a related language of the Niger Delta, such as Efik or Ibibio, where the term *dibia* refers to a "doctor" or "healer", one who enjoys a very positive role in the communities he serves, and where a related term, *abia*, denotes various kinds of esoteric knowledge, including knowledge of herbal healing.<sup>30</sup>

We speculate that the term obeah was used by early African arrivals from the Niger Delta area and overheard by Whites in one of the older British colonies, such as Barbados (where at present, as noted above, the earliest evidence exists for the use of this term) or St Kitts, another old British sugar colony. Although such Whites probably misunderstood the

full meaning of this term, they nonetheless incorporated it into their own vocabulary to refer to the non-Western (i.e., African-based) religious and healing practices of the enslaved population. From the colony of its origin, the term then spread among both Whites and Blacks of various ethnic groups and diffused to other parts of the West Indies as new colonies and plantation economies took root and as the slave trade continued to expand. Spreading to other West Indian areas and becoming part of the white Creole lexicon, the term was also incorporated into the lexicons of the Creole languages spoken by the enslaved peoples, many of whose ancestors came from ethno-linguistic groups other than Igbo or neighbouring peoples.

Wherever the term originated and under whatever conditions it diffused, just how complete the negative redefinition of obeah is in different parts of the anglophone Caribbean remains largely an open question, since so little reliable ethnographic fieldwork has been done among practitioners of obeah and their clients. Although obeah has been stigmatized for its negative effects in the post-colonial West Indies, it is also clear that its positive side is recognized, if not actually emphasized. For example, reporting on her field work in Antigua during the mid-1980s, Lazarus-Black writes that

in addition to cases in which obeah was invoked to determine theft, my field notes include instances in which it aided fertility, protected a home, lifted the spirits of a depressed child, healed a woman suffering from an illness no doctor could diagnose. . . . Some of the lawyers, too, have had recent clients and cases "worked" by obeah men or women to influence the search for justice [including] . . . to bring back a boyfriend or husband who has begun seeing another woman.

Similarly, of the recent scholarly literature, Kean Gibson gives one of the most detailed examinations of obeah among non-Maroon peoples. Basing her findings on field research, Gibson, herself Guyanese, describes the types of obeah practitioners in present-day Guyana. Some "do 'dirty work' . . . [and] can be enlisted to harm one's enemies" or even cause death. Nonetheless, Gibson clearly gives the impression that practitioners who do "good work" are more commonly sought. Such practitioners, she writes, are "employed to bring about success in romantic relationships", and "may also solve problems of confusion in a home, e.g., quarrels between family members". They can be "enlisted to have court cases dismissed or end in victory", "to make a client wealthy", and can function as "fortune tellers", involved in the divination of the cause of illness; some practitioners are also "bush doctors",

utilizing home-made remedies to "heal physical and spiritual ailments". One can also consult a practitioner "to be strengthened against evil which may be sent by someone". "It is said", Gibson reports, "that many students at the University of Guyana protect themselves against evil forces sent by their fellow students to make them fail their examination."<sup>31</sup>

And what of a society such as Barbados where obeah during the period of slavery was so closely associated with divination, protection, and healing? Barbadian culture has changed considerably since the slave period, and particularly over the past several decades, and obeah clearly does not play the role that it did in earlier times. In post-colonial, post-1966 Barbados, even among the working class and urban and rural poor – what the late Jamaican social anthropologist, M. G. Smith, might have called the "folk"<sup>32</sup> – where belief in occult supernatural power is most pronounced, obeah is viewed as fundamentally evil. Its practitioners, it is believed, have the power to harm and control people, and misfortune and bad luck, including mental illness or even, on occasion, death, can be explained in terms of an obeah spell. Sometimes this negative view of obeah was used as a threat to discipline a child. An older friend of Handler's, for example, recalled that when he misbehaved as a child the family's cook would threaten him: "Mr. John, ef yuh don behave yusef, I goin/gwine call de obeah man fuh yuh." Yet, despite this emphasis on malevolence, an obeah person can also direct forces for socially beneficial purposes such as healing or giving assistance in other areas of life. In the words of a popular guide to Barbadian customs and practices, obeah may be used to "patch lovers' quarrels, exact revenge on an enemy, counteract evil, tell fortunes, interpret omens, secure marriages or keep errant husbands at home".<sup>33</sup> Whatever the case, it is because of the presumed positive value of obeah that practitioners are still sought by clients (probably only a small minority of Barbadians today) who have confidence in their abilities.

A similar ambiguity exists in Jamaica, where anti-obeah legislation remains on the statute books to this day (see the Appendix for an overview of anti-obeah legislation in the anglophone Caribbean). Obeah is publicly denounced as both a superstition and a deadly form of sorcery, even while large numbers of individuals continue to consult self-professed obeah men and women in private for healing and help with a bewildering array of personal and social problems. The most solid evidence for the positive role played by obeah in rural Jamaica in modern

times comes from the research of trained ethnographers who have carried out extensive fieldwork and shared the daily lives of the practitioners of traditional religions. Their work leaves little doubt as to the morally neutral nature of obeah and casts serious doubt on the idea that obeah is practised primarily for evil purposes. Given the evidence produced by such investigators we can only conclude that the insistence in the Caribbean and by outsiders that obeah is essentially – by definition – a form of evil sorcery must be attributed either to lack of real knowledge of obeah as it is actually practised, wilful de-emphasis of those aspects of obeah practice that contradict such a view, or a kind of ideologically induced blindness.<sup>34</sup>

Despite public condemnation of obeah in Jamaica, the pendulum may be swinging in the opposite direction. For instance, even though more conservative Rastafarians continue to oppose obeah as vehemently as the established churches, a group of prominent Jamaican Rastas issued a public statement in 1999 calling for the repeal of Jamaica's anti-obeah laws. Quoted in a newspaper article, Miguel Lorne, an attorney-at-law as well as a Rastafarian, taking a position rather similar to ours, explained their reasoning: "You must understand," he said, "these laws came about from the colonial masters and these laws were intended to suppress the African race and to suppress the spirituality that is within the African. Anything him (the colonial master) can't understand, him call it obeah and witchcraft." In the same article, Quaco, a 34-year-old, self-proclaimed obeah man from the rural parish of St Thomas, gave his own definition of obeah: "obeah ah one religion, not witchcraft," he said. "The people them come to me when they need help, when them sick, and me cure them."<sup>35</sup> This Jamaican practitioner's representation of obeah might seem oddly contradictory to that of many persons both inside and outside the West Indies who view obeah as the malicious use of supernatural/spiritual power to cause harm. However, it would seem perfectly natural to any Saramaka or Ndyuka Maroon in Suriname, as it probably would have been to a great many of those individuals who laboured on the slave plantations of Jamaica, Barbados and other British Caribbean colonies in past centuries.

## APPENDIX

### Notes on Anti-Obeah Laws in the Anglophone Caribbean, with Specific Reference to Barbados, 1806–1998 (Written in May 2004)

Time constraints and limited library resources at our disposal have prevented us from comprehensively studying the legislation relating to obeah, but it appears that from the nineteenth century on all of the territories of what is today the anglophone Caribbean (including independent countries and current dependencies of Britain) imposed legal sanctions against the practice of obeah. Although negative views and stereotypes of obeah and obeah practitioners persist to varying degrees in many parts of the anglophone Caribbean, changes in anti-obeah statutes in recent times reflect changing societal attitudes, political positions and efforts to discard the negative cultural and social legacies of the colonial past.

#### *Barbados*

The case of Barbados is instructive and is to some extent reflective of trends and changes in the wider region. Although an occasional eighteenth-century Barbadian law may have alluded to practices that might have been associated with obeah, the first law that explicitly mentioned obeah was passed in November 1806.<sup>36</sup> The law did not define obeah, but made it a capital offence, punishable by death, if it could be shown that the death of any enslaved person was caused by obeah; or transportation from the island if poison was administered to an enslaved person that did not result in death. According to the law's preamble, "many valuable slaves have lost their lives or have otherwise been materially injured in their health by the wicked acts . . . of Obeah-men and women pretending to have communication with the devil and other evil spirits".<sup>37</sup> By this period, Whites considered obeah as one of the most "heinous and grievous crimes".<sup>38</sup>

Another law was passed in 1818 because the earlier one – which was now repealed – was judged "ineffectual". The 1818 law was specifically directed against persons "who shall willfully, maliciously, and unlawfully pretend to any magical or supernatural charm or power in order to



promote the purposes of insurrection or rebellion of the slaves . . . or to injure and affect the life or health of any other person, or who willfully and maliciously shall use or carry on the wicked and unlawful practice of obeah". The penalties were death or transportation.<sup>39</sup> This law was modified slightly in May 1819, but no substantive changes were made to the 1818 law.<sup>40</sup>

The major 1826 "Slave Consolidation Act" repealed all antiquated slave laws and incorporated all of the island's current slave laws into one piece of legislation. The "wicked and unlawful practice of obeah" continued as a felony and poisoning was still mentioned as a characteristic practice of the obeah practitioner.<sup>41</sup> Although the "Slave Consolidation Act" went out of force with general emancipation, both the 1818 and 1819 laws continued on the books until their repeal in 1842. However, before their repeal the "Vagrancy Act of 1840" reduced obeah to a "vagrancy offence", that is, a minor offence, with up to 28 days' imprisonment.<sup>42</sup> Thus, during the approximately two-year period, 1840 to 1842, obeah was legally considered both a felony and a minor offence, the 1842 act being belatedly repealed almost two years after obeah was reduced to a "vagrancy".

Close to 60 years later, the legislature enacted the "Vagrancy Act of 1897" ("An Act for the suppression and punishment of vagrancy"). The 1897 law dealt with prostitution, begging and gambling in public places, obscenity, lewd exposure, etc. It also had an anti-obeah provision (Section 3 [2]), viz, "every person pretending or professing to tell fortunes, or using or pretending to use any subtle craft or device, by palmistry, obeah, or any such superstitious means, to deceive and impose on any of his Majesty's subjects . . . shall be deemed a rogue and a vagabond". The convicted person could be fined up to two pounds or "be imprisoned with hard labour for any term not exceeding one month".<sup>43</sup> (These were lighter sentences than those found in Jamaica or British Guiana at the time.)<sup>44</sup>

The "Vagrancy Act of 1944" continued the same anti-obeah provision of the 1897 law, and any person convicted of practising obeah, as defined by the provision, was to receive the same sentence as in the earlier law.<sup>45</sup>

"The Vagrancy Act of 1971", passed about five years after Barbados became an independent member of the British Commonwealth, continued the same anti-obeah provision of the 1944 Vagrancy Act, but now the fine could be up to \$3,500 (Barbadian currency) or imprisonment for a maximum of two years.<sup>46</sup>

The 1971 law was repealed in 1998 by "An Act to revise the law in relation to certain minor offences", otherwise known as the "Minor Offences Act, 1998". This act dealt with "disorderly behaviour", prostitution, loitering, "obscene and profane language to intimidate a person", lewd exposure, etc., and invoked a fine of \$ 2,500 or imprisonment for two years, or both. However, the 1998 law does not mention obeah. Thus, obeah was dropped from the statute books and is no longer a legal offence.<sup>47</sup> The reason for this omission is that when the attorney general of Barbados and his staff were discussing the draft of the 1998 law, they decided to leave out all references to obeah, viewing it as no longer relevant to Barbadian society and a relic of colonial times.<sup>48</sup> Thus, for the first time in almost 200 years, the practice of obeah was no longer considered illegal in Barbados.

### *Jamaica*

During the slave period anti-obeah acts or provisions were passed in 1760, 1810, 1817 and 1833. In the post-emancipation nineteenth century anti-obeah provisions were subsumed under several vagrancy acts – 1839, 1840, 1856, 1857 and 1892 – under which, as in Barbados, "all persons pretending to be dealers in obeah . . . shall be deemed rogues and vagabonds". By 1892, at least four enactments were in force that dealt specifically with obeah; these were modified and consolidated in the 1898 Obeah Act. This law did not specifically define obeah, but categorized the practitioner as "any person who, to effect any fraudulent or unlawful purpose, or for gain, or for the purpose of frightening any person, uses, or pretends to use any occult means, or pretends to possess any supernatural power or knowledge". Persons convicted under the 1898 Act could be imprisoned for up to one year, with or without hard labour, or, in lieu of prison, be whipped. The law was revised in 1973, but the penalty remained essentially the same, and the act is still on the statute books.<sup>49</sup>

### *British Guiana/Guyana*

Anti-obeah provisions were included in various nineteenth-century laws, particularly a major one passed in 1855 and again in 1893, with subsequent minor revisions.<sup>50</sup> Then, in the 1958 Criminal Code of British Guiana, under "Miscellaneous Offences and Matters", sanctions were imposed on convicted obeah practitioners, defined as:

any pretended assumption of supernatural power or knowledge, whatever for fraudulent or illicit purposes, or for gain, or for the injury of any person. . . . Whoever practices obeah, or by any occult means or by any assumption of supernatural power or knowledge intimidates . . . or pretends to discover any lost or stolen thing . . . or to inflict any disease, loss, damage or personal injury upon any person, or to restore any person to health.

Under this statute, the penalty could be imprisonment for three months or a fine if "any instrument of obeah" is found on a suspected practitioner.<sup>51</sup> The 1958 law remained in force through Guyana's independence in 1966. The new Guyanese constitution, as that in other newly independent Caribbean territories, gave freedom of worship to all religions, but there was no specific repeal of earlier anti-obeah provisions. However, in 1973 Prime Minister Forbes Burnham announced, as Kean Gibson has written recently, "that steps would be taken by his Government to repeal that part of the constitution that made it a specific offence to practice obeah - but the law [of 1958] would be there to ensure that some persons did not seek to practice obeah for capitalist gains". Although the obeah law was not repealed in 1973, many people believed that it was, and Burnham's widely circulated statement, Gibson emphasized, "gave elite sanction to the practicing of obeah". With the belief that obeah was legalized, "obeah became a lucrative and competitive profession".<sup>52</sup> We are uncertain if the anti-obeah law was removed in the revised laws of 1980. Even if it still remains on the books, for all intents and purposes it has no practical effect on the practice of obeah *per se*. However, people who profess to be obeah practitioners and engage in what are defined as fraudulent practices can be charged with a criminal offence or sued for fraud. This provision also applies to other areas of the Caribbean.

### Trinidad

Trinidad had anti-obeah legislation in the nineteenth century (for example, 1868), which was revised in the "Summary Convictions Offences Ordinance" of May 1921. This Act defined obeah as the "pretended assumption of supernatural power of knowledge . . . for fraudulent or illicit purposes or for gain or for the injury of any person". Those convicted could be imprisoned for up to six months, with or without hard labour. A male might also receive corporal punishment, while a female could be kept in solitary confinement for up to three days at a time - not to exceed a total of one month - during her prison sentence.

This Act was modified by 1950. It persisted until November 2000 when the "Miscellaneous Laws (Spiritual Reform) Act" was passed and all references to obeah were removed from the statute books of Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>53</sup>

### Anguilla

From 1825 to 1967 the laws of St Kitts were in force in Anguilla. In the latter year Anguilla "seceded" from St Kitts but remained a dependency of Britain. By 1978 Anguilla had introduced various statutes that were germane specifically to Anguilla, and dropped various provisions that had been inherited from the St Kitts legal code, including the anti-obeah provision in the Small Charges Act. Today in Anguilla (one of Britain's Overseas Territories), the practice of obeah *per se* is not illegal although people can be prosecuted if they engage in what are considered fraudulent practices.

### Windward and Leeward Islands

All of the independent countries of the Windwards and Leewards - Antigua/Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent/The Grenadines, and St Kitts/Nevis - had or have anti-obeah provisions in their laws that are invariably found in various Minor Offences Acts or Small Charges Acts. Since there has been no major reform of the criminal law in these territories for many decades - governments having other priorities - it is likely that anti-obeah provisions still exist, but we have been unable to research these laws in detail. However, even with the anti-obeah laws on the books, such provisions would be unconstitutional as the laws of these territories, like those in other anglophone Caribbean countries, guarantee freedom of religion or worship. If there is any prosecution of obeah practitioners, it would not be against obeah *per se*, but rather against persons who are believed to be practising fraud of one kind or another.<sup>54</sup>

In our own opinion, although we cannot argue this at length in the present paper, it is worth noting that certain kinds of practices usually considered "fraudulent" in the context of obeah, such as those related to healing or bringing good fortune - and, thus, still stigmatized and possibly still prosecutable under current laws - are generally treated as legitimate when occurring in the context of officially recognized

churches. Since prayers or other Christian rituals intended to heal or protect against misfortune are, unlike obeah, categorized as "religion" rather than "superstition", they are protected by legal guarantees of freedom of religion. Thus, the colonial legacy of disparaging religious or spiritual practices perceived as "African", or associated primarily with the predominantly black lower strata, remains intact.

## NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference "Crossing Boundaries: The African Diaspora in the New Millennium" (New York University, September 2000); the Second Conference on Caribbean Culture (University of the West Indies, Mona, January 2002); and a History Department seminar (University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, March 2002). William Freehling commented on a very early draft of the paper, while Jeanette Allsopp, Joan Brathwaite, Trevor Burnard, Katherine Clarke, John Cole, Barry Gaspar, Ronald Hughes, Velma Newton and David Trotman helped with various research issues. We are particularly grateful to Kean Gibson and Don Mitchell for taking the time to clarify various points concerning obeah laws in Guyana, Anguilla, and the Windward and Leeward Islands (see the Appendix). Anna McCrerey, Matthew Meyer and Laverne Ochoa provided research assistance.
2. Supernatural-related or magical practices involving curing, divination, protection and negative or harmful objectives (i.e., sorcery) occur throughout the Caribbean, but the term "obeah" only exists in the anglophone areas. Terms other than obeah are used elsewhere in the Caribbean in the same or a similar sense; for example, in Martinique and Guadeloupe where the term is *quimbois*. Even in some parts of what is today considered the anglophone Caribbean, but which have a French colonial past, the term obeah is apparently uncommon. In Saint Lucia, for example, the term employed is closer to what is found in the francophone Caribbean, but David Barry Gaspar notes, "it is more likely that kweyol [Creole] speakers would use the term kembois or chembois as a general referent. Obeah as a term in SL [St Lucia] has an Anglicized contextualization, and in that sense some kweyol speakers may refer to obeah" (Gaspar, personal communication to Handler, December 2003; cf. Michel Laguerre, *Afro-Caribbean Folk Medicine* [South Hadley, Mass: Bergin & Garvey, 1987], 27, 53-54). Philip Morgan claims that the "term was current among North American slaves" in eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Carolina Low Country, but it may have
3. been less common than he maintains. We have been unable to find corroborative evidence in a number of earlier standard secondary works on North American slavery, although Yvonne Chireau has more recently confirmed that the term was occasionally used in North America. Whatever the case, the term does not appear to have become a standard lexical feature in North America, where "conjurer" (sometimes, "hoodoo", "root working") became the more conventional term in the nineteenth century for a healer with supernatural powers. "Conjuring", as defined by Chireau, was "the African American tradition of healing and harming [and protection]" (Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Low Country* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988], 620; Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003], 4, 7, 21, 55, 174n41; cf. Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002], 41, 81, 85).
4. Kenneth Bilby, "The Remaking of the Aluku: Culture, Politics, and Maroon Ethnicity in French South America" (PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1990); Silvia W. de Groot, *Djuka Society and Social Change* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Company, 1969), 255; Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); see also Jean Hurault, *Les Noirs Réfugiés Boni de la Guyane Française* (Dakar: L'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, 1961), 251-253; Diane Vernon, "Some Prominent Features of Ndjuka Medicine", *New West Indian Guide* 63 (1989): 216-218. For historical materials, see, for example, Wim Hoogbergen, *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 33, 218; Richard and Sally Price, eds., *John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (Transcribed for the first time from the Original 1790 Manuscript) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 405, 521. Ample evidence also exists that prior to around 1940 the Accompong Maroons of Jamaica practised a traditional religion in which obeah - meaning the use of spiritual power for healing, protection and divination - played a crucial role (Barbara Klamon Kopytoff, "Religious Change among the Jamaican Maroons: The Ascendance of the Christian God within a Traditional Cosmology", *Journal of Social History* 20 [1987]: 474-476).
5. However, the most recent (March 2004) online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* seriously entertains the view taken in this paper.
6. Europeans, of course, were not exempt from beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery, and in the early Caribbean they often both accepted and doubted its efficacy. The belief in witchcraft was widespread in England in earlier periods; yet, prosecutions of persons considered witches, or who engaged in practices associated with witches, continued well into modern times (see,

for example, Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* [Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955], 106; Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches* [London: Fourth Estate, 2001], 149 and passim). In his recent analysis of eighteenth-century Jamaica, Vincent Brown notes that "obeah certainly emboldened the enslaved to resist the supremacy of their masters, and allowed blacks more generally to believe they could challenge whites. . . . As long as the spiritual power of obeah was credible [to Whites] black men and women wielded it to combat the worldly power of the whites" ("Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society", *Slavery & Abolition* 24 [2003]: 43. A similar, albeit psychoanalytically oriented, perspective, was taken many years earlier by Renzo Sereno ("Obeah: Magic and Social Structure in the Lesser Antilles", *Psychiatry* 11 [1948]: 15-31). For others who consider the political functions of obeah and the threats it posed to white and colonial authority, see, for example, Mindie Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts and Illegal Encounters: Law and Society in Antigua and Barbuda* [Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994], 53-54 and passim; David Trotman, *Crime in Trinidad: Conflict and Control in a Plantation Society 1838-1900* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 223-229 and passim. For an earlier perspective on the political functions of obeah, see Michael Mullin, "Obeahmen and Slaveowning Patriarchs", in Vera Rubin and Arthur Tudin, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1977), 481-490. This also occurred in early Brazil (see James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003], 159-160, 165-166).

6. For example, Thomas Thistlewood's approximately 10,000-page manuscript diary details an extraordinary array of activities concerning the enslaved persons he managed and owned in Jamaica during a 36-year residence (1750-1786), but apparently provides no details on the practice. Although Thistlewood "disapproved of obeah", he nonetheless recognized that enslaved persons sought its practitioners to explain misfortune or for various therapeutic needs (Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004], 224; Trevor Burnard, personal communication to Handler, March 2004). Cf. Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 279. Referring to Jamaica, but in a comment that can easily be extended to other Caribbean areas, Vincent Brown observes, "obeah was almost always practiced in secret, and the whites who left written descriptions probably knew very little about it" (Brown, "Spiritual Terror", 39).
7. Referring to the US South in the nineteenth century, Sharla Fett's observation is also germane to the West Indies. Although enslaved people "frequently used conjuration in their struggles against slaveholders . . . [it] also

figured in the internal conflicts of slave communities . . . men and women frequently 'worked roots' to resolve or escalate personal disagreements [among themselves]" (Fett, *Working Cures*, 85). James Sweet's similar observations on early Brazil are also pertinent: ". . . an attack on another slave using African religious powers was always more than a personal attack; it was also a strike against the master's economic and social well-being. Every act of malevolent witchcraft against a slave became an act of resistance against the slave master. The depletion of slaves due to witchcraft - whether real or imagined - was a blow to the institution of slavery" (Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 171).

8. Although obeah practitioners sometimes used poisons, poison was not an intrinsic feature of obeah; moreover, neither the knowledge of poisons nor their application was confined to obeah practitioners. This is a point commonly overlooked by scholars who write about obeah.
9. Philip Curtin, *Two Jamaicas: The Role of Ideas in a Tropical Colony 1830-1865* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), 29; Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature", in Sidney W. Mintz, ed., *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1974), 75.
10. See, for example, Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 162, 219; Michael Craton, *Sinews of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 218-219; Douglas Chambers, "'My Own Nation': Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora", *Slavery & Abolition* 18 (1997): 88-90; Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 57-58; Neville A. T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 1992), 80-81; B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 271-272; Cf. Mullin, "Obeahmen", 487; Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 248; Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 54-57; Brown, "Spiritual Terror"; David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 246; Trotman, *Crime in Trinidad*, 223-229, passim; Bernard Marshall, "Society and Economy in the British Windward Islands, 1763-1823" (PhD thesis, Department of History, University of the West Indies, Mona, 1972), 206-208.
11. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), 188; David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture, and Environmental Change since 1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 545n18; David Lowenthal, *West Indian*

*Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 116; Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 34; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 620. For the Bahamian historian, Gail Saunders, obeah "is essentially a type of 'bad medicine' in the African sense of the word, but also has certain elements of witchcraft" (*Slavery in the Bahamas 1648-1838* [privately printed by Gail Saunders, published by the Nassau Guardian, 1985], 93n64). For other examples of scholars who view (or viewed) obeah as an essentially antisocial form of witchcraft/sorcery in the slave community (even though they occasionally implicitly acknowledge its positive social role), see J. Harry Bennett, *Bondsmen and Bishops: Slavery and Apprenticeship on the Codrington Plantations of Barbados, 1710-1838* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 22, 80; Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and Its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Slave Plantations* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 153-157); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 171-172; Karl Watson, *The Civilized Island Barbados: A Social History, 1750-1816* (Barbados: K. Watson, 1979), 87-88; Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 78-79; Alan Richardson, "Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797-1807", in Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds., *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 171-193; Frank Wesley Pitman, "Fetishism, Witchcraft, and Christianity Among the Slaves", *Journal of Negro History* 11 (1926): 650-668; Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts*, 44; Leonard Barrett, *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, Double-Day, 1974); Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1977); Jean Besson, "Religion as Resistance in Jamaican Peasant Life", in Barry Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean World Views* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 56-57; John Edward Philips, "The African Heritage of White America", in Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 231; Roderick A. McDonald, ed., *Between Slavery and Freedom: Special Magistrate John Anderson's Journal of St Vincent during the Apprenticeship* (Barbados and Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), 156-157nn144-146; Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (London: James Currey, 1990), 73-76; Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean* (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 190-191; M. G. Smith, *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 106-107. Relying on primary sources, the standard dictionary of Jamaican English (which is not infrequently used by scholars) defines obeah as "the practice of malignant magic"

or "to work witchcraft against (someone)", although Richard Allsopp's more recent definition is broader and takes into consideration some of obeah's positive functions (F. G. Cassidy and R. B. LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English* [1967; 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980], 326-327; Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 412-413).

12. Joseph J. Williams, *Voodooos and Obeahs: Phases of West India Witchcraft* (New York: Dial Press, 1932), passim. *Myalism* was a term used by nineteenth-century missionaries and other writers to refer to religious organizations among enslaved persons and their descendants in Jamaica that were influenced by Christianity and functioned to counteract the influences of witchcraft/sorcery. The related term used by practitioners themselves was *myal*, and it probably had a different meaning for them than myalism did for the missionaries. Today, in the few parts of Jamaica where the term myal has been retained in connection with current religious practices, it has no connotation of counteracting sorcery or malevolent power, but simply means "spirit possession" or "a manifestation of spiritual power through a medium". Nor is present-day myal opposed to obeah; rather, it complements it, and is seen as a means of accessing it (as shown by Bilby's ethnographic research in several different Jamaican communities where the term myal is still commonly used in connection with religious practices). Although some writers suggest that myalism was widespread in the anglophone Caribbean, there is no evidence that such a group, either in name or practice, ever existed anywhere but in Jamaica. Williams asserted, but provided no independent evidence, that "myalists" in Jamaica were simply versions of the Asante *okomfo* (traditional priest) transplanted to Jamaica, where they operated under a different (non-Asante) name, but continued to combat the evil wrought by malicious, Asante-style *obayi-fo* (witches), that is, obeah workers. Although this notion has gained some acceptance in the scholarly literature on Jamaica, there is little, if any evidence, to support it.
13. This exact wording was later incorporated into Barbados's first anti-obeah law, passed in 1806 (see the Appendix). The Jamaican law also specifies a variety of material objects that obeah practitioners might use, for example, parrots' beaks, dogs' teeth, alligators' teeth, broken bottles and rum (see *Acts of Assembly. Passed in the Island of Jamaica, from 1770 to 1783, Inclusive* [Kingston, Jamaica, 1786], Act 91, December 1781).
14. Testimony of Stephen Fuller, in *Report of the Lords of the Committee of the Council Appointed for the Consideration of all Matters Relating to Trade and Plantations* (London, 1789), 214-216. This testimony was to serve as a primary source for Bryan Edwards' account of obeah, and his account, in turn, was to serve as the authority for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. In such later writings, however, the account was used highly selectively, as the emphasis shifted more and more toward a one-sided view of obeah as entirely malignant in nature.

15. Goveia, *Slave Society*, 248. Bernard Marshall uses the same quote, but identifies the agent, Spooner, as the "agent for Grenada" (Marshall, "Society and Economy", 206). We have been unable to consult the original source in the *Parliamentary Papers*.
16. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest reference to the term obeah in a Jamaican source is in a 1760 slave law (passed after the so-called Tacky's Rebellion – in which obeah men were held to have great influence), known only by title. This law contained a provision "for preventing the practice of obeah" (Acts of Assembly, Passed in the Island of Jamaica, from the year 1681 to the year 1769 [Kingston, Jamaica, 1787], Vol. 2, 6). The term, however, actually appears in manuscripts at least from the 1730s; for example, it is occasionally mentioned in official correspondence dealing with the Jamaican Maroons and the British military campaigns against them during that decade.
17. British Library, Sloane Mss. 2302, Letters from Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, November 1710–September 1712; United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Letter Books, Volume B.6, item 62, Holt to Henry Newman, 18 February 1729; Griffith Hughes, *The Natural History of Barbados* (London, 1750), 15–16; Brathwaite, Replies to Queries, in "Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council . . . Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa", *Parliamentary Papers* 26 (London: House of Commons, 1789), part 3. For additional excerpts from other primary documents relating to Barbados, see Jerome S. Handler, "Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, ca. 1650 to 1834", *New West Indian Guide* 74 (2000), 57–90.
18. For example, Handler, "Slave Medicine", 78–79. See also, Chireau, *Black Magic*, 15–16 and passim for many examples of similar functions of conjurers in North America, including amulets for protection against white racial oppression.
19. A. J. Rubel and M. R. Haas, "Ethnomedicine", in Thomas M. Johnson and Carolyn F. Sargent, eds., *Medical Anthropology: A Handbook of Theory and Method* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 126–127.
20. A similar situation obtained in early Brazil where "the same slave diviner who one day found runaway slaves or a cure to an illness could, on the following day, inflict injury and mayhem on the master, his family, and other slaves" (Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 159–161).
21. For example, Monica Schuler, "Akan Slave Rebellions in the British Caribbean", *Savacou* 1 (1970): 16–17; Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels*, 246–247; Hall, *Thistlewood*, 93, 106; Jerome S. Handler, "Slave Revolts and Conspiracies in Seventeenth Century Barbados", *New West Indian Guide* 56 (1982): 16. For the United States, see, for example, Chireau, *Black Magic*, 66–67.
22. J. W. Orderson, *Creoleana: Or, Social and Domestic Scenes and Incidents in Barbados in Days of Yore* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1842), 35; Raymond Richards Collection, University of Keele Library (Staffordshire, England), "Report made by the committee of the Agricultural Society of Barbados, appointed to draw up a plan for the regulation of plantations with a particular reference to the treatment of slaves", 14 November 1812, in *Minute Book of the Society for the Improvement of West India Plantership, 1811–1812*, 134.
23. John Stewart, *An Account of Jamaica and its Inhabitants* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808), 256; Henry Thomas De La Beche, *Notes on the Present Conditions of the Negroes in Jamaica* (London: T. Cadell, 1825), 29; James M. Phillippo, *Jamaica: Its Past and Present State* (London: John Snow, 1843), 247; George Peck, ed., *Jamaica: Enslaved and Free* (New York: Lane and Tippet, 1846), 126; P. H. Cornford, *Missionary Reminiscences; or, Jamaica Retraced* (Leeds: J. Heaton and Son, 1856), 23. For examples from Antigua, Trinidad and St Vincent, see George Eaton Simpson, *The Shango Cult in Trinidad* (Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1965), 13–14; McDonald, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, 156–157; Sheena Boa, "Walking on the Highway to Heaven: Religious Influences and Attitudes Relating to the Freed Population of St. Vincent, 1834–1884", *Journal of Caribbean History* 35 (2001): 198–200; Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts*, 110, 157–158; Trotman, *Crime in Trinidad*, 223–229, and passim.
24. Thomas Banbury, *Jamaica Superstitions; or the Obeah Book* (Kingston: De Souza, 1895), 5.
25. May Robinson, "Obeah Worship in East and West Indies", *Folk-Lore, A Quarterly Review of Myth, Tradition, Institution, & Custom* 4 (1893): 210; Austin H. Clark, "An Ingenious Method of Causing Death Employed by the Obeah Men of the West Indies", *American Anthropologist* 14 (1912): 572; Martha Beckwith, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 106.
26. See, for example, Madeline Kerr, *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* (London: Collins, 1963), 213; Fernando Henriques, *Jamaica: Land of Wood and Water* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 186; Leonard Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum: African Roots in Jamaican Folk Tradition* (Kingston: Heinemann, 1977), 18.
27. H. P. Jacobs, "Dialect, Magic, and Religion", in Morris Cargill, ed., *Ian Fleming Introduces Jamaica* (London: André Deutsch, 1965), 110; Barrett, *Sun and Drum*, 115; Ivy Baxter, *The Arts of an Island* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1970), 134; Diane Robertson, *Live Longer Look Younger with Herbs* (Kingston: Stationary and School Supplies Limited, 1990), 5. For Barbados, similar views appear in books for general audiences or tourists, for example, Ronald Tree, *A History of Barbados* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1972), 27; George Hunte, *Barbados* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1974), 204–206.
28. Keith Patchett, "Criminal Law in the West Indies" (mimeo, University of the West Indies Law Library, 1970), 23.
29. Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 185; Williams, *Voodooos and Obeahs*, passim; Joseph J. Williams, *Psychic Phenomena of Jamaica* (New York: Dial Press, 1934), passim.

30. Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby, "On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean", *Slavery & Abolition* 22 (2001): 87-100; see also Douglas B. Chambers, "The Murder of Old Master Madison in 1732: A Local Event in Atlantic Perspective", *Maryland Historian* 28 (2003): 36-38nn63-64. The observation that "Obia . . . seems to be a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the northeast or east of the Niger delta, which simply means 'Doctor'", was made close to a century ago by Sir Harry Johnston in his monumental work, *The Negro in the New World* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 253. Johnston never developed the idea in terms of slavery in the British Caribbean, and Joseph Williams and Orlando Patterson (the latter footnotes Johnston's view) simply ignore it (perhaps because it would have been at variance with their own views of obeah). Other modern writers, apparently ultimately relying on Johnston, acknowledge the possibility of an Efik or Ibibio origin while, at the same time, also entertaining the possibility of an Asante-Twi origin, without endorsing either (e.g., Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 620; Allsopp, *Caribbean English Usage*, 412-413; Cassidy and LePage, *Jamaican English*, 326-327).
31. Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts*, 159; Kean Gibson, *Comfa Religion and Creole Language in a Caribbean Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 38-49; also, Gibson, personal communication to Handler, May 2004. For other examples in the late colonial or early post-colonial period, see Olga Comma, "Folklore in Trinidad", in Nancy Cunard, ed., *Negro: An Anthology* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970), 301; Melville Herskovits and Frances Herskovits, *Trinidad Village* (1947; New York: Octagon Books, 1964), 225-226; Keith Otterbein, "Conflict and Communication: The Social Matrix of Obeah", *Kansas Journal of Sociology* 1 (1965): 113; John A. Holm and Alison W. Shilling, *Dictionary of Bahamian English* (Cold Spring Harbor, New York: Lexik House Publishers, 1982), 145; Roger Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 173; Jay D. Dobbin, *The Jombee Dance of Montserrat: A Study of Trance Ritual in the West Indies* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986); Sereno, "Obeah"; Raymond T. Smith, *The Negro Family in British Guiana* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 114, 120, 165.
32. M. G. Smith, *Stratification in Grenada* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 235-236.
33. Henry Fraser, Sean Carrington, Addinton Forde, and John Gilmore, *A-Z of Barbadian Heritage* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann Publishers, 1990), 123; Lawrence E. Fisher, *Colonial Madness: Mental Health in the Barbadian Social Order* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 106-107, 132; Constance Sutton, "The Scene of the Action: A Wildcat Strike in Barbados" (PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, 1969), cited in Fisher, 105; George and Sharon Gmelch, *The Parish Behind God's Back: The Changing Culture of Rural Barbados* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 145-146; Watson, *The Civilized Island*, 87-88; Hunte, *Barbados*, 204-205; Ronald Hughes, personal communication to Handler, May 2004.
34. See, for example, Kenneth Bilby, "The Kromanti Dance of the Windward Maroons of Jamaica", *New West Indian Guide* 55 (1981), 52-101; Kenneth Bilby and Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki, "Kumina: A Kongo-Based Tradition in the New World", *Cahiers du CEDAF* 8 (1983); Donald W. Hogg, "Jamaican Religions: A Study in Variations" (PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 1964); Joseph G. Moore, "Religion of Jamaican Negroes: A Study of Afro-Jamaican Acculturation" (PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1953), 125-126, 130-131. A similar perspective was taken by Renzo Sereno, a psychiatrist who, during the 1940s, interviewed practising obeah men in St Thomas, Tortola, Antigua, St Kitts, and Dominica (he also gathered information in St Croix, Montserrat and Nevis), and was one of the few investigators at this time to have had actual contact with practitioners. The skill of the obeah man, he wrote, "is to assuage the anxieties of his client and make possible some form of immediate relief. . . . [He] deals exclusively in personal problems; his function is to bring equilibrium or health to cases of personal maladjustment" (Sereno, "Obeah", 23). See also, Jay Dobbin, *The Jombee Dance*; Gibson, *Comfa Religion*, passim.
35. Both Lorne and Quaco are quoted in an online article, "Rastafarians Object to 'Anti-Witchcraft Laws'", *World African Network New Media*, 22 January 1999 (<http://www.wanonline.com/news/news5905.html>); also in Sam Pragg, "Away with Obeah Laws Say Rastafarians", 20 January 1999 (<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43/165.html>).
36. The governor of Barbados justified the law to the Colonial Office: "Obeah has existed time out of mind" in Barbados, and "was never considered a crime which could be punished by any existing law" (CO 28/87, Combermere, "A Case for the Opinion of His Majesty's Crown Lawyers" [concerning the obeah trial of Jack, an enslaved person], 21 December 1818). Yet, the Barbadian historian Karl Watson maintains that an anti-obeah law was enacted in the eighteenth century. We have found no corroborative evidence for this law; moreover, Watson's reference is inadequate to verify the source that he cites. In a much later publication, Watson repeats this assertion but provides no specific citation (Watson, *The Civilized Island*, 97n107; Karl Watson, "Capital Sentences against Slaves in Barbados in the Eighteenth Century: An Analysis", in Alvin O. Thompson, ed., *In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy* [Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002], 211).
37. CO 30/18, no. 262, Barbados Assembly and Council, "An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah", November 1806.
38. CO 28/87, Combermere to Bathurst, 28 December 1818.

39. CO 30/20, no. 367, Barbados Assembly and Council, "An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah", 28 June 1818.
40. *Ibid.*, no. 383, Barbados Assembly and Council, "An Act for the Better Prevention of the Practise of Obeah", 26 May 1819.
41. Barbados Assembly and Council, "An Act to Repeal Several Acts and Clauses of Acts Respecting Slaves", October 1826, *Parliamentary Papers* 25 (1826-27): clause 38.
42. Clifford G. Hall, "A Legislative History of Vagrancy in England and Barbados", *Caribbean Law Review* 7 (1997): 350-353. The Barbados Vagrancy Acts of 1838 and 1840 were "virtual copies of the Vagrancy Act of 1824 in England". The 1838 Barbados Act did not mention obeah, while the 1840 Act merely added the word "obeah" after the word "palmistry" that was found in the English law (*Ibid.*, 338, 353).
43. C. V. H. Archer and W. K. Fergusson, *Laws of Barbados . . . Revised and Consolidated*. vol. 2, 1894-6-1906-5 (Barbados: Printed by the Advocate Company, 1944), 145; *The Laws of Barbados In Force on the 31st Day of December, 1996*. vol. 6 (Barbados: Government Printer, 1997), cap. 156, pp. 2-8. In nineteenth- and even twentieth-century England, the Witchcraft Act of 1735, and particularly the Vagrancy Act of 1824, were used to prosecute mediums on charges of conjuring spirits and fortune telling, i.e., divination. The Vagrancy Act of 1824 "specifically outlawed fortune telling and palmistry as acts of deception", and a person who engaged in these practices was referred to as a "rogue or vagabond" (Gaskill, *Hellish Nell*, 149, *passim*; cf. C.G. Hall, "A Legislative History", 351). Visiting Barbados in early 1909, Sir Harry Johnston learned that "very little superstition remains among the coloured people; but occasionally there are proceedings in the police-courts against Obia men and women for malicious poisoning of animals or plants" (Johnston, *Negro in the New World*, 225).
44. Frances Marcelle Clyne-Gairy, "An Analysis of the Law Relating to Obeah in the Commonwealth Caribbean" (LLB thesis, Faculty of Law, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, March 1975), 19.
45. Archer and Fergusson, *Laws of Barbados*, 145.
46. *Ibid.*, *Laws of Barbados*, 1971, Revised Edition.
47. *Barbados Acts 1998* (Bridgetown: Government Printing Office), 2-6.
48. Professor Velma Newton verbally communicated this information to Handler. She received her information from the Hon. David Simmons, chief justice of Barbados. He had been the attorney general when the 1998 Vagrancy Act was drafted and enacted.
49. Clyne-Gairy, "Analysis of the Law", 10-15; Herbert C. McKenzie, "The Obeah Act 1898: An Antithesis of Fundamental Rights in Jamaica" (LLB thesis, Faculty of Law, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, March 1994), 4-5, 45.
50. Clyne-Gairy, "Analysis of the Law", 15, 18.
51. British Guiana, Criminal Code Cap 76, 1958, sections 147, 148, 149.

52. Gibson, *Comfa Religion*, 16-19. We must thank Gibson for her assistance in drafting this section.
53. Clyne-Gairy, "Analysis of the Law", 19. Trinidad's 1921 Ordinance and sanctions against obeah are reproduced in Herskovits and Herskovits, *Trinidad Village*, 345-347; see also Trotman, *Crime in Trinidad*, 223-229 and *passim*, for anti-obeah legal cases in the nineteenth century. For the 2000 law, see Trinidad, U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, 2001 (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2000/5741pf.htm>).
54. The sections on Anguilla and the Leeward and Windward Islands greatly depend on the generous assistance and knowledge of Justice Don Mitchell, Q.C. (personal communication to Handler, May 2004). Cf. Clyne-Gairy, "Analysis of the Law", *passim*; Patchett, "Criminal Law in the West Indies", 23-24; Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts*, 44, 158-160.