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978-1-107-02565-3 - The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World

Diana Paton

Excerpt

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Introduction

Obeah's persistent presence haunts Anglo-Creole Caribbean history. For a long time obeah was the ultimate signifier of the Caribbean's difference from Europe, a symbol of the region's supposed inability to be part of the modern world. It has been, that is, a foundational category in the positioning of the Caribbean within what Michel-Rolph Trouillot termed the 'Savage Slot' in Western thought; a crucial part of the way in which 'the West' produces 'the Caribbean' as its other.¹ In the post-independence era the negative construction of obeah was inverted by some, so that obeah came to be seen as the spiritual centre of enslaved people's resistance, something that might be celebrated – so long as it was safely in the past. In published accounts of Caribbean history and culture stretching from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries obeah is frequently glossed as, and thus reduced to, the European concepts of 'witchcraft or sorcery'.² More sympathetic texts explore its origins in Akan, Sierra Leonean, and Central African concepts of healing, harm, and the divine.³ Yet despite their differences, paradigms that understand obeah as backwardness and those that position it as resistance share a great deal. For both, obeah is the most vivid and enduring symbol of and inheritance from Africa within the Anglo-Creole Caribbean; for both, it is particularly strongly associated with slavery; for both, it marks out the Caribbean's difference from Europe and thus helps – despite all the evidence – to position Europe as rational and anti-superstitious. For both, it is a singular phenomenon whose meaning provides a focal point for interpreting Caribbean culture.

Yet the meaning of obeah has never been so straightforward. As a term, 'obeah' has always referred to multiple phenomena. At the most obvious

¹ Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, chapter 1. My focus in this book is the Anglo-Creole Caribbean, made up of the territories that were at one time British colonies. To avoid repetition I sometimes use 'Caribbean' as shorthand.

² For examples see Bilby and Handler, 'Obeah'.

³ For instance Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 131–42.

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level, it describes practices involving ritual attempts to manipulate a world of spiritual power. But the practices included and excluded by that term, and the ethical directions connoted by it, have varied greatly depending on the speaker's point of view. Obeah is also, importantly, a term that has for more than two centuries been animated by the use of law, because of its status as a crime. With few exceptions, obeah is not and has not been a term that people use to describe their own practices, and therefore it has rarely been reclaimed as positive from within. Those people who, now and in the past, undertake practices that others describe as obeah generally consider themselves to be doing something else. They often make use of designations that invoke the modernity rather than the primitivism of their knowledge, such as 'science-man', 'scientist', 'doctor-man', or 'professor'. Efforts to rewrite obeah in more positive terms have tended to come from the safe distance of the academy, of cultural nationalist politics, or of both.

This book was not written to pin down, once and for all, this elusive creole cultural phenomenon. Rather, it unpicks the multiple meanings of the term obeah, and considers the cultural, political, and social effects of the consolidation of that term as a means of describing and defining a very wide range of practices that, broadly speaking, involve the ritual manipulation of spiritual power. *The Cultural Politics of Obeah* argues that, precisely because of its indeterminacy and multiple meanings, obeah has been a telling category over a long period, one that has frequently marked out critical debates about the status of the Caribbean and its people; about power, race, nation, and citizenship. This book thus investigates the construction of obeah by multiple parties and in multiple ways. Like a musical recording, it utilizes several tracks that have been produced separately but are best heard (or read) together. One track provides a (selective) history of representations. How has the term 'obeah' been applied to changing and often locally specific sets of practices? How have colonial, nationalist, and popular definitions and representations of obeah contrasted, and overlapped? What cultural work have they done in the construction of the Caribbean? To what has the Caribbean been constructed as an 'other' through representations of obeah?

A second track traces the history of state policy towards a legal category, 'obeah', that was itself repeatedly produced by state power – including the power of low-level actors within what we might call the everyday state. How did obeah feature in Caribbean law, in different times and places? How were these laws enforced, at whose instigation, and with what effects? The third track within the book provides a history of popular interactions with and contributions to both the first and second tracks. How did participants in popular religious movements, parts of whose

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practice were sometimes referred to as ‘obeah’, understand and relate to that term? How did their vulnerability to prosecution for the crime of obeah affect their collective worship and spiritual practice? How did their understanding of obeah, which often included the use of the term to describe dangerous and hostile power used by others, contribute to popular political discourse?

Since the eighteenth century obeah has had a privileged place in understandings of what is both illicit and powerful about subaltern Caribbean religion. This book argues that concern about obeah was repeatedly linked to debates about the political status of the region and its people. Obeah was a significant presence in many contested political issues. It was mobilized in conflicts about the slave trade and the abolition of slavery; it was present in debates about the contraction of representative government in the late nineteenth century; it helped people to understand the meaning of the uprisings of the 1930s; and questions about it were raised when independent states were established in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. At the same time, the illegality of obeah, and the means by which this illegality was enforced, had a profound effect on the practice of religion and its place in everyday life. The book therefore moves among its three tracks of representation, state activity, and everyday behaviour in order to break down conventional boundaries between social history and the history of politics and representation. I hope that in doing so I am better able to explain not just the complex formation of obeah, but more generally the relationship of everyday politics – particularly the politics of religion – to the world of formal politics. This book also stresses interconnections across the Caribbean region, comparisons between different territories within the region both within and beyond the British Empire, relationships across British imperial space, and the persistence of both representations and legal practices concerning obeah over long periods of time. The history of the cultural politics of obeah demonstrates the ongoing reverberations and connections among places divided by language, distance, or political experience but linked by movement of people and/or colonial status.

This book has been written at a time when official representations and interpretations of obeah are undergoing change. Until recently obeah was interpreted by those with cultural power in the Caribbean either as profoundly negative or as an embarrassing relic and sign of ignorance. At this stage just one example will suffice. Frank Cundall, the British founder of the Institute of Jamaica (IoJ), in 1908 completed a book-length manuscript, ‘The British West Indies Today’, intended to inform potential tourists, settlers, and investors about opportunities in Britain’s Caribbean colonies. Cundall was committed to developing cultural

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institutions within the region, and was far from the most hostile of observers of what he understood as the region's African-derived cultural practices. His description typifies one form of insider's representation of obeah. It combines genuine interest, evidenced through details available to Cundall largely as a result of obeah's illegality, with clear condescension:

Obeah, or as it is called in some of the islands Wanga, may be described as the art of imposing upon the credulity of ignorant persons by means of feathers, bones, teeth, hairs, cat's claws, rusty nails, pieces of cloth, dirt, and other rubbish, usually contained in a wallet. The obeah man is usually dirty and unkempt, with a slouching gait and averted face. The cult sometimes develops into poisoning, by means of ground glass, arsenic, or prepared vegetable extracts.

The obeah man provides charms to make a woman's lover true, to bring success to a business, to obtain a verdict in a police or law-court, to cure the sick – often by removing substances from the wound, to harm a rival, to keep thieves off a provision ground by means of little black wooden coffins, and bottles filled with some dirty mixture, and, in fact, to do anything that his clients may be fools enough to believe. In Trinidad recently one Obeahman purveyed means to facilitate burglary in the shape of a mixture intended when smoked in a pipe by a burglar to induce sleep on the inmates of the house – consisting of crushed bones, tobacco & scraps of paper! He used also to catch a supposed lost shadow (or soul) but that is rarely heard of now-a-days.

His symbol is a stick carved with twisted serpents, from which, by some the word obeah has been derived – *ob* being Egyptian for serpent; but it is more probably connected with the Efik *ubio*, a charm to cause sickness or death.⁴

Cundall's successors at the Institute of Jamaica take a different approach, revealing a transformation in official perceptions. In the last ten years two exhibitions produced under the Institute's auspices have normalized obeah by depicting it as part of the landscape of Jamaican religion. In 2006, nearly a century after Cundall wrote, the Institute's exhibition 'Of Things Sacred', curated by Wayne Modest, included obeah as one of a series of Jamaican 'sacred traditions' displayed to the public through material culture, text, and image. Obeah was the first 'tradition' presented to the visitor, and thus played a role as a precursor or predecessor of other Jamaican religions.⁵ In 2011 the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica – a sub-unit of the IoJ – staged a smaller exhibition, 'Guzzum Power: Obeah in Jamaica', that, as the title suggests, focused entirely on obeah. This exhibition presented obeah as a living component of the Jamaican present, 'one of the most powerful West African influences

⁴ Frank Cundall, 'The British West Indies Today', unpublished manuscript, National Library of Jamaica, MS 934, 96.

⁵ 'Of Things Sacred', unpublished catalogue, Institute of Jamaica archives.

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in Jamaica' and 'part of the social fabric' of the island.⁶ Its choice of language was a far cry from that of Cundall, and, indeed, from that of exhibitions of the late 1960s, when an exhibition commemorating the centenary of the founding of the Jamaica Constabulary Force included a 'gruesome corner' which displayed 'many implements of obeah'.⁷ Today, even official government bodies recognize obeah as part of everyday life. In its 2003 Standard Occupational Classification, designed to develop the categories provided by the International Labour Organization and to be used with the census, the Statistical Institute of Jamaica (STATIN) introduced a new occupational category 'obeah man/woman' as a sub-category to the larger ILO-sponsored subgroup of 'astrologers'.⁸

There has thus been substantial change in the public status of obeah in the Caribbean in the recent past. This change is marked by the recent decriminalization of obeah in Anguilla (1980), Barbados (1998), Trinidad and Tobago (2000), and St Lucia (2004).⁹ It is a shift that echoes the changing status of religions associated with Africa in other parts of the Americas. In Brazil, Candomblé was from the 1930s promoted as a 'national "folk" institution' and eventually became a national symbol, even while, as J. Lorand Matory explains, it provided 'convenient journalistic canvasses for escapist white fantasies and political allegories'.¹⁰ In Cuba, santería has, as Stephan Palmié points out, moved from being 'the object of state-sponsored denunciation' to being officially pronounced part of the Cuban revolution's struggle against global capitalism.¹¹ In Haiti, religious freedom was guaranteed by Article 297 of the 1987 Constitution, adopted after the overthrow of Jean-Claude Duvalier. Article 297 specifically overturned earlier anti-Vodou laws that prohibited 'superstitious practices'.¹²

Yet despite partial decriminalization, the status of obeah has changed much less than has that of these other African Atlantic religions. Obeah differs from Candomblé, Vodou, and Afro-Cuban religion in its lack of self-confident promoters and interpreters. In Brazil, Haiti, and Cuba intellectuals who identified with Candomblé, Vodou, and santería, respectively, pressed for change in the status of those religions from the

⁶ Weise, *Guzzum Power*.

⁷ 'Constabulary Force Exhibition Nov. 28–29', *Gleaner*, 13 November 1967.

⁸ Statistical Agency of Jamaica, *Jamaica Standard Occupational Classification 2003*, Annex II, minor group 515. Copy in author's possession, from STATIN. The occupation had the alternate title of 'Mother', 'Reader-man', or 'Shepherd', and the occupational summary was one who 'gives spiritual guidance, administers and mixes potions'.

⁹ Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, xiii.

¹⁰ Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 164, 166. ¹¹ Palmié, *The Cooking of History*, 20.

¹² Ramsey, 'Vodouyizan Protest'. As Ramsey explains, Article 297 was abrogated in 2012, although the effects of this are as yet unclear.

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late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They often acted as informants for anthropologists, who used their words to produce new narratives. J. Lorand Matory, David Brown, and Stephan Palmié have shown that for Brazil and Cuba respectively, important figures such as Seu Martiano de Bomfim and Fernando Guerra played critical roles in the early twentieth century, both in providing the information and more importantly in coaxing a particular interpretation out of critical intellectuals such as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues and Fernando Ortiz.¹³ In Haiti, similar processes led to the re-evaluation of Vodou by Anténor Firmin and later Jean Price-Mars.¹⁴ In the Anglophone Caribbean a tiny number of spiritual practitioners who considered themselves to be practising obeah contributed to the twentieth-century anthropological record. Particularly significant were the Jamaican spiritual workers who acted as informants for Joseph Moore and Donald Hogg.¹⁵ But the work of these anthropologists was much less influential than that of their peers who studied Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti. This was partly because the British Caribbean colonies were for a long time considered the least anthropologically interesting part of a region that was itself a backwater for the discipline of anthropology, because its religious and cultural forms appeared insufficiently exotic.¹⁶ While an important body of anthropological work on religion in the region was produced, it for good reasons focused on discrete religious formations such as Revival, Orisha Worship/Shango, and the Spiritual Baptist tradition, rather than the difficult-to-define ‘obeah’, a term often used by critics of all these religious groups to condemn aspects of their practice. Today, while the status of Revival, Orisha, and Spiritual Baptism has been transformed to the point where in Trinidad and Tobago a national holiday, Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day, celebrates the repeal of the Shouters’ Prohibition Ordinance, ‘obeah’ continues to raise considerable concern and anxiety.¹⁷

Obeah remains illegal in much of the Caribbean, and not simply due to omission. When, in 2013, the Jamaican government removed flogging as a judicial punishment from the Jamaican judicial system so as to be able to sign the United Nations Convention against Torture, it amended

¹³ Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*; Brown, *Santería Enthroned*; Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*.

¹⁴ Fluehr-Lobban, ‘Anténor Firmin’; Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*.

¹⁵ Moore, ‘Religion of Jamaican Negroes’; Hogg, ‘Jamaican Religions’.

¹⁶ On the Caribbean as an overlooked region in early anthropology because it troubled the foundations of the discipline see Trouillot, ‘The Caribbean Region’, 20–1.

¹⁷ On the changed status of the Spiritual Baptist faith in Trinidad and Tobago see Glazier, *Marching the Pilgrims Home*; Henry, *Reclaiming African Religions in Trinidad*, 39, 50–74. The Shouters’ Prohibition Ordinance made practice of the Spiritual Baptist faith illegal. It was in force from 1917 to 1951.

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the Obeah Act of 1898. The amendment removed the punishment of flogging, but left the criminal status of obeah untouched.¹⁸ A public debate followed in which some called for decriminalization, but were opposed by as many others who argued that to decriminalize obeah would be anti-Christian.¹⁹ The catalogue to 'Guzzum Power' demonstrated similar anxiety. It included a 'General Disclaimer' on its opening page that warned, or perhaps reassured, readers that 'None of the material contained in this document should be construed as instructions or guides to the practice of obeah, which is illegal in Jamaica. The information is for general information purposes only.'²⁰ Similar concerns perhaps underlay STATIN's decision to locate its new occupational category of 'obeah man/woman' within the subgroup 'astrologers' rather than in other possible locations such as 'traditional and complementary medicine associate professionals', examples of which include 'Herbalist, Witch doctor, Village healer, Scraping and cupping therapist', or 'Religious Associate Professionals' (group 3414), a group which included 'faith healer, monk, nun, lay preacher'.²¹ STATIN's choice of the 'astrologer' category tellingly located the position of obeah in Jamaica today apart from the religious or healing roles that those who practise the activities of giving 'spiritual guidance' or 'administer[ing] and mix[ing] potions' usually consider themselves to undertake. Thus, despite the very real changes in the official response to obeah since Cundall's time, the shift to an interpretation of obeah as an everyday part of Caribbean life with parallels in every society rather than a concern or an embarrassment has been decidedly partial.

In writing about obeah I have tried to steer a course between two risks. On the one hand is the risk of reiterating the exoticization of Caribbean life that forms the heart of many depictions of obeah. Mervyn Alleyne critiques the 'obsession with obeah in White studies of Jamaican society', suggesting that this is 'symptomatic of the inability and unwillingness of Europeans to understand the culture of Africans'.²² That obsession is also implicitly critiqued by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who reveals the pre-occupation of anthropology and other Western scholarship with aspects

¹⁸ The Obeah (Amendment) Act 2013, www.japarliament.gov.jm/attachments/341_The%20Obeah%20%28Amendment%29%20Act,%202013.pdf, last visited 9 May 2014.

¹⁹ Balford Henry, 'Senators to Push for Decriminalisation of Obeah', *Jamaica Observer*, 29 February 2013.

²⁰ Weise, *Guzzum Power*.

²¹ International Labour Organisation, International Standard Classification of Occupations 08 and International Standard Classification of Occupations 88, both available at www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco08/index.htm, last viewed 30 October 2012.

²² Alleyne, *Roots of Jamaican Culture*, 83.

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of cultures subjected to anthropological study that ‘prove’ their difference and otherness.²³ In this book I hope to avoid reproducing these problems, through my efforts not to uncover the ‘real’ obeah, but rather to show how the variety of practices and beliefs that have been deemed to be obeah have been regulated, suppressed, discussed, represented – and how all of these activities have been part of the process by which obeah has been produced and stabilized as an object. The repeated reiteration of the lexical item ‘obeah’ eventually led to the existence of a set of practices which observers and participants all, more or less, know to be obeah. But that ‘more or less’ matters, because a lot remains unknown. By taking apart the production of the sense that ‘obeah’ is a coherent phenomenon, and by investigating the ways in which the belief in its existence played out in the very concrete fields of legislating, policing, prosecuting, and punishing, we see that its existence and reproduction, as an object of comment and suppression, has been part of the dynamics of colonial and post-colonial power over more than two centuries.

Running counter to the risk of exoticism is the risk that in turning away from trying to study the history of obeah as object, we end up with a story that is only about the top-down imposition of power. It would be ironic if, at the point at which ‘obeah’ became a sign of resistance rather than of evil, works of scholarship such as this one argued that it was not created by enslaved and colonized people at all, but rather was a construction of the colonizer. This is not my argument. Rather, I want to draw attention to the way in which obeah was a *mutual* construction, made in the spaces between the powerful’s imposition and the colonized’s resistance; but also, and more importantly, moving beyond assumptions about the permanent division between the always-imposing colonizer and the always-resisting colonized.

I hope that this work will have implications for understanding the political dynamics of culture beyond the Anglophone Caribbean. In particular, I hope it will allow us to move beyond some debates in African Atlantic and colonial history in which positions have become entrenched. Perhaps most entrenched of all is the debate between constructivists and realists. On one side are scholars who emphasize the constructed nature of the categories through which we apprehend the world – categories such as caste or tribe – and in particular the way in which new discursive categories were frequently produced in colonial contexts.²⁴ The work of constructivist scholars has, however, been criticized by those who emphasize the long-standing existence of phenomena that came to be

²³ Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 18–20.

²⁴ See for instance Ranger, ‘The Invention of Tradition’; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

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categorized in new ways by colonial discourse.²⁵ This debate has parallels, in African Atlantic studies, in the long-standing conflicts between those who, following Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, emphasize creolization and the importance of cultural construction in colonial slave societies, and others, following Melville Herskovits, who argue for the continued resonance of specific African ethnic identifications in diaspora.²⁶ There has recently been an enormous expansion of work in the latter vein, stimulated in particular by new research on the slave trade that has significantly improved our understanding of the origins of Africans in the Americas.²⁷ Yet this work at times reaches an impasse. After tracing a particular cultural form to Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, or Kongo predecessors, what is the next analytic step? (The same problem – though with a different political charge – arises in studies of cultural practices in the Americas deriving from Europe.) Vincent Brown has tried to shift the terms of the debate on Africans in the Americas. He suggests that rather than ask ‘How African was it?’ we should instead ask ‘What was it used for? What were its consequences?’²⁸ These are the kinds of questions that guide this study of obeah. I ask not just what obeah was used for and what its consequences were, but also, what was the concept of obeah in its representation by colonial authorities and writers used for? What was the creation of a crime of obeah used for?

Repeatedly, debates about obeah – at least, those debates about obeah that have left archival and printed records – have been organized through binary oppositions structured by arguments about the appropriate legal and political response that states should take to it. As I show in more detail later in this book, until about the 1830s the repressive view was that obeah practitioners were genuinely powerful ritual specialists, who controlled other people, either stimulating them to rebellion or damaging their health. Prosecution and harsh punishments were required to restrain the power of obeah. The growing dominance of an Enlightenment approach to the supernatural meant that the acceptance of the reality of obeah’s spiritual power was no longer an intellectually respectable viewpoint by the late nineteenth century, but the argument for severe

²⁵ For one example see Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?*

²⁶ Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*; Herskovits, *Myth*.

²⁷ The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database developed by David Eltis, David Richardson, and colleagues has been very influential here. See www.slavevoyages.org. Significant work influenced by this paradigm includes Falola and Childs, eds., ‘The Yoruba Diaspora’; Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*; Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*.

²⁸ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 8. Also see J. Lorand Matory’s important critique of the debate between ‘retention’-focused scholars and constructivists: Matory, ‘The “Cult of Nations”’.

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measures continued to be made. Advocates of this view changed their explanation for why obeah was damaging, but maintained the claim that it *was* destructive and therefore must be met with harsh repression. The problem was now diagnosed as one of fraud and charlatanism which allegedly kept the Caribbean population uncivilized, and interfered with proper judicial processes and medical procedures. Adherents of the repressive view saw obeah practitioners as people who exercised illegitimate power over the mass of the population and thus stood in the way of what they understood to be the proper hierarchies of an orderly society. Advocates of this view drew on theories of punishment rooted in retributionist arguments to make the case for the criminalization of obeah and the maintenance of its illegal status, for treating it as a specific crime rather than an aspect of other crimes, and for severe punishments: torture and the death penalty during slavery; flogging and long prison sentences in the period since 1838. They tended to make claims for absolute racial difference and hierarchy. The descendants of Africans, they argued, were inherently irrational, prone to superstitious beliefs and thus likely to believe in obeah. Harsh punishments were necessary due to this inherent racial inferiority. If obeah practitioners were not prosecuted and subjected to strong repression, the punitive faction argued, their power was reinforced because people believed that they were more powerful than the state.

Opposing these racial determinists were the advocates of a more liberal position, who argued for more than a hundred years that belief in obeah was inevitably dying away through the logical movement of Caribbean culture towards modern, rational belief systems and/or Christianity. Supporters of this viewpoint, from William Wilberforce in the 1820s, through Charles Frederick Lumb, a judge in Jamaica in the 1890s and 1900s, to writers in the Jamaica *Gleaner* in the 1960s, argued against the passage and maintenance of specific laws against obeah and against the infliction of particularly harsh punishments for it.²⁹ Such punishments, they claimed, drew attention to the significance of obeah and thus reinforced the power of its practitioners. To the extent that they believed that obeah should be criminalized – and most liberals did believe that some of its practitioners should be prosecuted – they thought that it should be combined with other offences such as vagrancy or small-scale theft, and should receive the relatively ‘minor’ punishments accorded these crimes. This view was often deeply enmeshed with a liberal approach to colonial

²⁹ Wilberforce, *An Appeal*, 29; Judgment in the case of Rex v. Chambers, 29 May 1901, enclosed in CO 137/620, Hemming to Chamberlain No. 406, 5 July 1901; ‘Jottings’, *Gleaner*, 6 February 1960.