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Response to Alexander Rocklin, “Haunting Violence: Obeah and the Management of the Living and Dead in Colonial Trinidad.”

This is a fascinating essay. It uses a rich variety of sources to draw some advisedly tentative conclusions about ways in which African laborers, Indian laborers, and colonial governors drew upon fluid and shifting notions of Obeah in both condemning and justifying violence during the period of indentured labor in Trinidad.

Other invited commentators on this essay have focused on the brilliant ways in which Rocklin reads accounts “against themselves” as he considers accounts of violence perpetrated against colonized subjects, sometimes by British authorities and sometimes by one another. Having read Rocklin’s analyses of Indian and African religious notions about “spirits,” the commentators have noted, for example, the difficulty of trying to discern which religious ideas informed or encompassed ideas from other cultural provenances. They have also spoken of the trickiness of discerning history from colonial newspapers that exploited the ideas about Obeah to assign motive for killings by and of East Indians while also using Obeah, as well as “Hindu mysticism,” as means of degrading Hindu and African religions. What follows adds some further ideas to their discussions. My remarks are primarily related to Hindu constructions of death that may bolster or perhaps subtly refine some of Rocklin’s assertions.

I was particularly intrigued by Rocklin’s discussion of violent death as a route of escape from the brutal realities of indentured labor and a return home to India. Rocklin explores a return narrative that should be viewed alongside other narratives. One is return to India as the reward for completing contractual obligations (one often likened, in various accounts, to the return of Ram to Ayodhya). The other is return of successful descendants of immigrants, such as the recent pilgrimage of Prime Minister Bissessar to India to meet long lost relatives. Return by death, or going “Calcutta-side,” as Rocklin notes, is a scenario that feeds into the trope of “life is cheap” for Hindus because there are plenty more lives to live. Here Rocklin deftly shows the divergent Hindu and colonial frames of reference for the return-by-death scenario, whether or not conjoined with confessions or accusations of Obeah. Especially interesting is the idea that escaping by death, but being buried with a whip, emblematic of colonial authority, assures permanent freedom from capture via jumbies or the British.

As someone who writes about violent death scenarios, I would like to see Rocklin expand his treatment of Indian understandings of death beyond the Brahmanical. It is true that in Brahmanical texts as well as in popular culture there has been much discussion of the importance of dying as a whole being, one not marred by bodily injury: this renders the body a perfect sacrificial victim and as so a cosmic microcosm, which, through a “perfecting” ritual (*samskara*) sets the dead free and makes the universe whole. That said, as in Trinidad, in India there are many differing conceptualizations of death and soteriologies. It is difficult to know which are informing understandings of the Trinidadian burials that Rocklin describes, but Rocklin has, with honesty, admitted the

fuzziness of trying to discern precise meanings, given the pool of potential signifiers he considers. Here I suggest other potential valences.

Within North India, dying violently has been understood by many Hindus as a sacrifice in and of itself, which means that the body that is injured and bloodied constitutes “remains” after a sacrifice that has liberated the self (*atman*). For this reason, soldiers who have died on the battlefield are not considered “impure” or “wandering ghosts” to their loved ones, but rather sacrificial victims who have died perfect deaths as heroes. The good death/bad death distinction suggested by Parry, who worked in Varanasi, and drawn upon by Rocklin thus needs to be refined in light of this. Heroic death is typically not good or bad but rather the *perfect* death for those defending others. Hence there is no need for a death *samskara*: the body may become carrion.

I agree with Rocklin that when there is testimony about the importance of wholeness for a corpse, there is surely Brahmanical provenance for anxiety, but when there is no testimony, the importance of wholeness should not be assumed, especially for those who would have taken pride in the martial deeds of ancestors (as many do, especially in terms of the “Mutiny” or “First War of Independence). The exigency of their own defiance of cultural authority may well have been informed by such cultural memories, particularly by those who claimed that their ancestors came to Trinidad after taking part in the Mutiny. I do not know how frequent such claims were during the period of indenture, but keeping in mind “Kshatriya” derived death scenarios (in which battlefield death leads to heaven or “*virgati*”) might be useful among the many others that Rocklin considers.

A second issue that I would like to mention is the notion of “catching” spirits. I enjoyed the discussion of catching but would like to enrich the pool of significations by pointing out that in Hindi one of the most common verbs for possession is “catch” (*pakarna*). This term is commonly used for spirits (or gods, the distinction between them so often lying in the eyes of the beholders) of various sorts who “capture” victims, i.e., “possess” them. Like another common verb for possession, *khelna* or “play,” the terms are ambiguous and do not easily line up with a welcome/unwelcome distinction. If one venerates the possessing being, then possession is typically fortunate; if one does not, it is typically unfortunate. Being possessed by one’s hero (*vir*) is typically auspicious; being caught by someone else’s is typically not, as heroes protect their own by fighting inimical others. I think that in the context of Trinidad, as Rocklin shows, the Indic notion of “catching” cannot but resonate with the history of slavery and indentured labor and I suspect that this Indic notion facilitates the association.

I make these two points about Indian constructions not to critique so much as to support Rocklin’s general thesis about the complex and shifting nature of the “fuzzy” relationships he so fearlessly and astutely analyzes.

Rocklin’s essay is a superb contribution to our understanding of the life of “imaginaries” in histories. It is written with intelligence and integrity: it suggests a wide array of potential significations within fluid cultural matrices. I look forward to seeing a more extensive treatment from Rocklin in the near future.