Discourse, Power, and Evidence

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How are scholars, trained to investigate empirical facts, expected to apprehend the supposed presence and meaning of other-worldly beings in the everyday life of the colonial Caribbean? A good way to start is to explore the relationships between signifier and signified, and between discourse and practice: the narrative traditions that surround the customary acts which inform the narratives. Obeah is a particularly rich arena of investigation because it is an important interlocutor between other religious traditions. All religious traditions are semantically freighted, but likely due to its particularly amorphous and concealed qualities, obeah lends itself well to diverse agendas and subject-positions. Historically in the Americas obeah has referenced such a wide contingency of acts, objects, moments, intentions, and interpretations that pinning it down to being something in particular is rarely a firm conclusion. The canonical "isms" (Khan 2003) that lend religious traditions the illusion of ideological or historical constancy are not part of obeah's constitution. The fluid application of the label "obeah" to a range of heterodox, subaltern-generated Caribbean religious traditions means that there is no single definition of "obeah," its composition, or its significance. However, one quality attributed to Caribbean obeah is consistent: the ambiguity of its instrumental power for malevolence or for justice.

The story of Peerah and Niermal captures the ambiguity of obeah's powers, specifically in terms of their reliance on the authority of colonial juridical institutions and traditional *panchayats* to arbitrate their conflict. This raises the interesting question of what constitutes obeah's "subversiveness." How much do obeah's subaltern theories of power differ from colonial theories of power? Do they simply option different agents of authority, or is there more

than one morality of power at work? Obeah's acts may strive for one thing (restitution, revenge, etc.) and obeah's moral principles about the authorization of power may resonate with other, presumably contrasting epistemologies, like those of the British colonial legal apparatus. Violence, in theory and practice, runs along a continuum of perceived harm and justice, depending on perspective and how closely power and privilege are linked. Obeah is a phenomenon that reveals that all exercises of power contain various moral stances. The issue is when, and to whom, power is just.

Indians' entry into the world of colonial legal authority can be empirically traced (if not necessarily definitively interpreted); their entry into the world of Afro-Trinidadian spirits and spirit-work presents a more challenging inquiry into the relationship between discourse and practice. The case of Kisnaram and the "Congo man," as Rocklin views it, shows that plantation-situated Indians were beginning to embrace local spirit traditions, and piecemeal rather than wholesale, "such as imagining vengeful spirits of the dead as jumbies." This kind of adoptive sense-making is to be expected; enculturation is a saturating, fragmentary, and on-going process. More importantly, this discussion also prompts us to ask if Kisnaram (or the reporter) was employing local vernacular to describe something Kisnaram experienced—being tormented into confession by a "big jumbee, " for a variety of reasons (e.g., in order to communicate remorse to an authority figure, to alleviate his conscience, etc.)—or, had Kisnaram taken up local beliefs in the supernatural? In other words, to what extent does language reflect or shape the interpretation of experience? And how might we ascertain this? Spirit worlds have cross-cultural similarities that are conveyed in particular forms that typically change over time; the Kisnaram case, among others that Rocklin discusses, asks us to think creatively about the processes of translation involved.

Rocklin points out that in Trinidad obeah was considered a primitive superstition and that Hinduism was a recognized religion. But obeah was also feared, and some aspects of Hinduism were denigrated. Ridicule was a common colonial strategy of containment, commonly (but not exclusively) coming in the form of charges of fraudulence—practitioners allegedly duping their clients. The policing of fraudulence has been a key strategy in the colonial management of what constitutes religious legitimacy and illegitimacy. Hinduism among Indo-Caribbeans, and virtually all Caribbean "syncretic" religious traditions (like Vodou, Santeria, Orisha, Kali Puja, Mariyamman), have been subject to these forms of colonial policing, which shifted non-Christian religions between the two categories of legitimate and illegitimate, depending upon historical and social context and whether they were being equated with obeah. When equated with "obeah," like obeah itself, they have been relegated beyond the limits of social acceptability. Arguably, Islam was not so susceptible to this ideology of illegitimacy, since, like Christianity, it was understood by colonizers to be text-based. Also, 19th century Indo-Muslims in Trinidad were at times merged with Hindus, as "Hindoos of the Mahometan faith."

While obeah is a "race-making term," as Rocklin argues, building on Paton (2009), in usage all religious traditions may be utilized as race-making terms, not the least being "Christian" in the colonial Americas (or "Muslim" in the current moment). Caribbean colonial anxieties operated within a racial hierarchy in which obeah symbolized an individual's or a group's racial identity (as well as cultural development and social value). Obeah's complexity was thus reduced by the British colonial gaze to a racializing sign based on certain spirit-working practices that were part of a homogenizing discourse that racialized indentured laborers as "Indian" irrespective of other distinctions that even colonial observers acknowledged. We can think of obeah, broadly, as a racializing signifier, but not a unique one. Obeah's race-making

works largely through its discursive homogenization of difference (while at the same time promoting the notion of otherness) and being a term of demotion (what I have called demotion by denigration [Khan 2013]) slipped into the "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991) of western epistemology. Accordingly, the idea of obeah further downgraded what were already thought of as Africans' "superstitions" (by making them more alarming and more indicative of backwardness), and downgraded the various dimensions of Hindu (read: "Indian") cosmology despite British colonial valorization of Hinduism until about the mid-18th century. Depending on how obeah was defined, colonial discourse arguably already had incorporated Indians into an obeah-ready state, so to speak, with titillated denigration of such practices as, for example, "fire walking" and "hook swinging." Such practices, among others, came to be metonymic of the "race" of obeah.

"Haunting Violence" underscores fascinating questions about the interpretation of power and the construction and use of evidence. Colonial news media reportage, first and second hand accounts of certain cultural practices, and primary and secondary sources interpreting those practices all offer multiple layers of fact and fancy. This is, of course, not a new issue in historiography. But the project of retrieval and analysis becomes even more rich and complex when the fact and fancy also involve an array of material and spirit worlds.

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