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Haunting Violence: Obeah and the Management of the Living and the Dead in Colonial Trinidad

This essay is an attempt to make sense of several scenes in the history of spirit worlds in Trinidad—the ways in which East Indians<sup>1</sup> and their descendants were haunted by, and came to haunt, the island. It takes up ghost stories: stories of violence, violence that conjured ghosts, and violence that conjured histories of other violence, including histories of the transnational trade in unfree labor.<sup>2</sup> This essay also looks at struggles against the violence perpetrated against the living and the dead in a colonial plantation society.

There is an unavoidably fuzzy relationship between talk of the activities of spirits, evidence for spirit working and healing practices widely construed, and accusations of “obeah” or witchcraft. This essay delves into that fuzziness. It looks at Indian spirit imaginaries and the effects of the constraints and possibilities of plantation life on how spirits and the afterlife were imagined and practiced. Indians adopted and adapted old and new categories of spirits to conceptualize and manage the harshness and violence in the plantation colony—interpersonal conflict, assault, and murder, the injustices of unexplained killings, and the violation of sacred spaces. They also reworked and deployed techniques for rectifying the dehumanizing effects of those conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Indians were brought to the Caribbean through a system of indentured labor set up by private corporations and facilitated by the British East India Company at the insistence of sugar planters in the region. In the British Empire, slavery formally ended in 1834. Most former slaves had little interest in continuing to live in the slave barracks and work on plantations after slavery’s end (certainly not for the wages the plantation owners were willing to pay). As a result of this exodus from plantation jobs, there was an outcry among sugar interests in London for a cheap source of labor. This source was found in South Asia (among other places). The British began shipping Indians to their Caribbean basin colonies in 1838, and provided labor for French and Dutch colonies in the region as well. The first ship, the *Fatel Razack*, arrived in Trinidad in 1845 with 227 contract workers. Over the course of the indenture scheme, from 1838 to 1917, about a half a million Indians were brought to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. Around 144,000 of those ended up in Trinidad.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Lincoln defines violence as “the deployment of physical force in a manner that tends to convert subjects [...] into depersonalized objects.” This definition includes both murder, the literal making of human beings into things (corpses), as well as enslavement, the reduction of humans to labor power (Lincoln 2012, 83).

Obeah is hard to define, though its legal definition was deceptively simple: “every pretended assumption of supernatural power or knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Included under the category were a wide and diverse spectrum of discourses, practices, and material objects drawn from Africa, India, Europe, and the Americas. These included healing practices and subaltern toxicology (involving the use of herbs as well as pharmacy medicines); the possession and use of mail-order catalogue magic books (often from Chicago’s De Laurence Company); and claims to the “supernatural” power to control superhuman beings, such as ghosts, sometimes through the ritual manipulation of human remains, for the purposes of, for instance, finding lost objects (material objects like buried treasure or less material ones like lost love). The category obeah was a part of a larger repertoire of techniques through which colonial regimes in the British Caribbean managed unfree laboring populations. Colonial regimes invoked the threat of obeah as “African” witchcraft to help combat slave uprisings, and, later, they invoked the danger of obeah as “the assumption of supernatural power” to manage West Indian colonial subjects. Through the effects of anti-obeah laws in the colonial West Indies, beginning with laws instituted in reaction to the slave revolt Tacky’s War in Jamaica in 1760, the category obeah became (re)entwined with, broadly speaking, subaltern spirit worlds and afterlife imaginaries.<sup>4</sup> Subalterns’ adoption, adaptation, and embodiment of colonial norms of religion included the incorporation of the category obeah as (re)formulated through the law, along with its negative associations.<sup>5</sup> Subalterns had to imagine techniques of spirit working through or against the category obeah. Therefore, analysis of the history of subaltern spirit worlds in the West Indies must negotiate

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<sup>3</sup> Laws of Trinidad and Tobago, Vol III, 71.

<sup>4</sup> Handler and Bilby have argued that although the influence of white elite colonial perceptions of “obeah” have given the term a negative valence, many slaves and their descendants had, before slavery and after, understood obeah to be a morally neutral “medicinal complex” and that this was the original meaning of the term (Handler and Bilby 2001, 87, 92-94).

<sup>5</sup> Palmié 2002, 207; Paton 2009.

between the discourse on obeah and the heterogeneous practices that were often described using that term (though the people engaging in their practice would rarely describe them as such). One must be attendant to the ways in which these converged, clashed, and resonated. This paper attempts such a negotiation, looking at the ways in which the discourse on obeah, a highly contentious and unequal joint venture between colonizers and colonized, was invoked and contested through acts of categorization and ritual practices of spirit conjuring.

The first ghost story discussed below is of a murder-suicide from the late nineteenth century. It provides some background on the conditions on estates, but also importantly raises questions of obeah and Indians' conceptions of life after death. In colonial documents and the popular press, the question of Indian views of death<sup>6</sup> typically arose in relation to plantation violence: capital punishment and the curbing of murders on plantations. Elites in nineteenth century Trinidad typically thought of Indians as viewing death, as the Agent General of Immigrants put it in 1866, as "a means to annihilation or absorption," so that the gallows instilled no fear in them, only contempt.<sup>7</sup> As with the colonial discourse on obeah, we cannot simply rely on such elite portrayals, meant to dehumanize Indians by using common orientalist tropes of Indian nihilism and Hindu immorality. Nor are simple generalized descriptions of Hindu beliefs about karma and rebirth<sup>8</sup> sufficient to understand the ways in which life in colonial Trinidad specifically shaped the reformulation of Indian death and afterlife imaginaries. These colonial documents must be read against themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> Particularly "Hindu" conceptions, although who counted as "Hindu," as well as the way in which colonial elites made distinctions among Indians, changed over time.

<sup>7</sup> *The Port of Spain Gazette* (hereafter, POSG), March 31, 1866. In an article in *The Port of Spain Gazette* in 1880 on whether to end capital punishment in Indian murder cases, the author wrote that death held no terror for Indians because of their "superstitions," but also because it was thought that they saw death as "a welcome passage to an eternity of bliss" and so it could not be a deterrent (POSG, December 18, 1880).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Kistow, 2004.

The first section of this essay looks at an early moment in the incorporation of Indians into the discourse on obeah. But it also begins an examination of the ways in which the specific context of life on the plantation in Trinidad—the challenges of plantation life, the presence of local spirit traditions, the prohibition of cremation, the fact that Indians were living outside of India, and the effects of the mediating category of obeah—may have affected how Hindus imagined plantation violence and life after death.

The second and third sections look at discourse and practice (often categorized as obeah) relating to jumbies, a species of ghost, and the different ways in which Indians and others narrated Indians' production of, interactions with, and transformations into such ghosts. In Trinidad, Indians and Africans shared spirit worlds—loose, hierarchized taxonomies of superhuman beings, discourses on healing and the role of spirits in illness and misfortune, and the practices of healing and working with spirits. However, these shared spirit worlds were variously inflected by the particular histories of the groups involved, including histories of unfree labor and its violence. Section three explores the weight of such histories, and how Indian (and African) Trinidadians used rituals and their attendant spirits to practically reimagine those histories.

### I. Going “Calcutta-side”: Obeah, Suicide, and the Management of Violence

In March of 1875 the newspaper *The New Era* reported an incident in which an Indian laborer attacked a fellow Indian laborer with a cutlass on the Endeavour Estate in Chaguanas. He reportedly chopped the man on the back of the head but then killed himself, slitting his own throat with the blade. The attacker died there in the field, although his victim survived.<sup>9</sup> This is a

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<sup>9</sup> *The New Era*, April 12, 1875.

relatively straightforward, if rather gruesome narrative, and it became a common one in the papers in Trinidad in the late nineteenth century.

Life on plantations was often filled with hardship. Indians were far from home. In India, recruiters for the indentured labor scheme, as the Master Pilot at Calcutta put it in 1838, “kidnapped and cajoled” many Indians (though not all) in order to bring them to Trinidad.<sup>10</sup> Severe breach of contract laws kept laborers isolated on plantations. Indians spent most of their time during the indenture period either on the plantation, in the hospital, or in jail. Roughly thirty percent of indentured laborers (the majority of whom were Indian) were brought before the court for the breach of labor laws each year, including for leaving the plantation without a pass. There were high conviction rates for such crimes, higher than for most others sorts of offenses.<sup>11</sup> As it was during the period of slavery earlier in the century, life on plantations was often filled with violence: managers and overseers could abuse Indian laborers, often with little or no consequences, but Indian laborers could also sometimes violently attack overseers.<sup>12</sup> But most often the overt violence of Indian laborers was directed at one another. This trend of violence only got worse in the remaining decades of indenture. Between 1872 and 1880 27 percent of all murders were committed by Indians, but that percentage more than doubled throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, outstripping the rising percentage of Indians in the general population.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the description from *The New Era*, the newspaper *Fair Play*<sup>14</sup> gave a more detailed and somewhat different account of the Endeavour Estate attack, which provided very

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Kale 1998, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Trotman 1986, 186-187, 190, 194.

<sup>12</sup> Trotman 1986, 139-141.

<sup>13</sup> Niranjana 2006, 69.

<sup>14</sup> *Fair Play* was a weekly paper that reportedly had a wide circulation. The paper claimed that by 1875 it had the largest circulation on the island (Ali 2000, 302).

specific and sensationalistic motivations for what occurred. The *Fair Play* reporter told his readers that the man who attempted the murder and then committed suicide was an “industrious and well-behaved coolie” whose “mind” fell under the “immediate and powerful influence” of one of his fellow countrymen who practiced “what is known here under the name of Obeahism.” This influence reportedly caused this man to adorn his house with the “heads of cocks and the feet of fowls and various bones,” to become a “quarrelsome man,” and, ultimately, to attempt a murder-suicide. The paper alleged that the Indian obeahman knew that the man under his influence had money. He duped him into thinking that, to gain “higher degrees in the magic art,” he had to shed human blood and then cut his own throat, and that then the obeahman would “resuscitat[e] him in Calcutta.” This idea reportedly led to two attacks. First, it motivated the would-be murderer to quarrel with and then attack another laborer. The paper stated that the man he later attacked in the field just before his own suicide was a witness to this first assault. This whole account reportedly came out because the wife of the man who killed himself went to the “Obeah Coolie” after her husband’s death, asking him to resuscitate him as he had promised. The purported obeahman was taken into custody by the police.<sup>15</sup>

*Fair Play*, an elite mouthpiece writing for other elites, used the category “obeah” to explicate the situation of the murder-suicide: these attacks were the result of superstitious influences on an irrational mind, and not the result of, for instance, the terrible living and working conditions of Indian laborers. Following Diana Paton, we can call obeah, as religion’s other in Trinidad, a “race-making term.” Religion and obeah were used to highlight a contrast between the “civilized” and the “primitive.”<sup>16</sup> Colonial elites, in marking Indians with the

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<sup>15</sup> “Chaguanas,” *Fair Play*, April 8, 1875.

<sup>16</sup> Paton 2009, 2.

category obeah, portrayed them as deceitful, violent and irrational, in need of patronizing colonial guidance and discipline.

This account has many of the features of stereotyped descriptions of “obeah” in colonial sources in the Caribbean, which colonial regimes had used in part to authorize the brutality of slavery and the management of later colonized populations. There is the sincere dupe, the fraudulent obeah practitioner who wields excessive influence over the dupe’s mind, the bones and other animal parts that were generally understood to be signs of obeah in witchcraft investigations, and, what was often insinuated and greatly feared, ritual murder.<sup>17</sup> As with Homi Bhabha’s description of the colonial stereotype, obeah rendered the colonized “Other,” yet also a known quantity, which required no further explanation (except the stereotype’s repetition).<sup>18</sup> The reporting on the Endeavour Estate incident is an early example of the incorporation of Indians into the discourse on obeah. It also evinces the use of that discourse to manage plantation violence that was unsettling to elites and potentially threatening to the status quo of plantation society.<sup>19</sup> If the colonial regime in India found out conditions on the plantations in Trinidad had become excessively poor, they could stop the flow of laborers.<sup>20</sup> The dehumanizing effects of the

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, a famous case of purported ritual murder and obeah was that of the death of Luther Barrow, a three year old who disappeared in December of 1889, and whose body was found shortly after his disappearance (“The Laventille Tragedy,” POSG, January 16, 1889). The coroner called for calm, saying they at that point did not know how the child had died (“The Laventille Tragedy,” POSG Jan 23 1889). However, the coroner’s report eventually confirmed that the child had been murdered (“The Felonious Death of the Boy ‘Barrow’,” POSG March 2 1889). *The Port of Spain Gazette* maintained the assertion that Barrow’s death was the result of “Obeahism,” the principle features of which the paper defined as “murder and cannibalism” (“Obeahism,” POSG, January 19, 1889). On witchcraft scares in the Caribbean see Putnam 2012 and Palmie 2002, ch 3.

<sup>18</sup> Bhabha 2007, 95-101.

<sup>19</sup> This is related to broader categorical moves on the part of elites in Trinidad to elide ongoing violence such as suicide. In two cases in 1890, one a suicide and one an attempted suicide, two Indian men threw themselves in front of the same train in the course of two days in order to kill themselves. In a similar manner to *Fair Play* in 1875, *The Port of Spain Gazette* interpreted these tragic events, not as evidence of personal tragedy or the intolerable conditions in which Indians in Trinidad had to live, but as evidence of “Oriental barbarism”: they were superstitious attempts to commit ritual suicide in the manner that the British authorities thought Hindus did at the Jagannath festival in Orissa, India (“The Local ‘Car of Juggernaut,’” POSG, July 11, 1890).

<sup>20</sup> After investigations into unfair recruitment practices in India and poor working and living conditions in Mauritius, the Indian government suspended the migration of oversees Indian labor for several years beginning in May of 1839 (Northrup 1995, 62). In 1915, when James McNeill and Chimman Lal toured parts of the Empire to report on the

category obeah and its stereotypes explained away this shocking and relatively new phenomenon of plantation murder and suicide as being a result of the superstitious and primitive nature of the Indians.

We do not know the provenance of the narrative provided by *Fair Play*. It may well have been a reporting of an account as told by Indians themselves, possibly using the category obeah to make sense of or delegitimize this tragedy. However, the article's description does not reflect on why the man in this case might have wanted to return to India so urgently that he would be willing to murder someone and then make a ghost of himself. We can only speculate as to what may have caused the Endeavour Estate man's actions: the desperation caused by the grueling work and terrible living conditions on the plantation, the competition between laborers for meager resources, the loneliness and longing engendered by the great distance from home, perhaps the desire, living as he did in a near state of slavery, trapped on the plantation, to take control of his own life in one of the few and most drastic ways available to him while indentured. Yet there may be something more to the narrative provided by *Fair Play* than the sensationalizing work of categories like obeah on such a tragedy. Though we cannot be certain about exactly what happened, if this account does reflect subaltern reasoning about and understandings of this tragic event, it may provide evidence for how Indian ideas about death and the afterlife were being reformulated across the "dark water," within the restrictions of the context of nineteenth century plantation life in Trinidad.

Although there is not a great deal of evidence for it, it seems that the ideas reflected in the *Fair Play* piece, that with death Hindus thought or hoped that they would return to India, perhaps

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condition of Indian immigrants of the indentured labor diaspora, the government of India was particularly concerned to know what role the conditions of life under the indenture system played in the numbers of suicides of Indians in the plantation colonies, which in places like Fiji were seen as being particularly high and were a point of real concern (McNeill and Lal 1915, 315-319).

through reincarnation, rather than remain in Trinidad, were not simply idiosyncratic or orientalist fancy but may have been more widely held by Hindus living on the island.<sup>21</sup> For example, as reported in *The Port of Spain Gazette* in 1865, Gooroocheram, an Indian sentenced to death by hanging for the murder of his wife, Soobhudra, reportedly rejected the “Christian offices of the Gaol Chaplain,” preferring to die as he lived, “a Hindoo.” On the scaffold his last words “in his own language” before he was hung were that “he was going back to his own country.”<sup>22</sup> A somewhat more ambiguous instance comes from the early twentieth century. An article in *The Port of Spain Gazette* on Indian murders in Poole district suggests that the phrase “gettum Calcutta-side,” or getting someone to Calcutta, may have been a euphemism among Indian laborers for death. The beginning of the article reads: “Another indentured coolie has solved the problem of the Eastern mind as to a way of ‘gettum Calcutta-side.’ Hardly a month passes nowadays without fresh evidence being given us of the little value that the average East Indian places upon human life.”<sup>23</sup> These intriguing examples are suggestive of some of the ways the context of harsh and violent life on plantations may have helped to (re)formulate the afterlife imaginaries of Indians, as well as the relative valuations of India versus Trinidad in those imaginaries. At least some Hindus may have imagined that, though their bodies could not be

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<sup>21</sup> Suicide has generally been considered a “bad death” in India, but there has also been a long tradition of socially sanctioned (if controversial) suicide there, such as widow burning or self-starvation as a preparation for a “good death” (Michaels 2004, 151-153; Parry 1994, 163). Surviving an attempted suicide was not any kind of guarantee that an Indian laborer would get out of her indenture contract in Trinidad and be able to return to India. It usually landed the person in the lunatic asylum (“Attempt at Suicide,” POSG, December 31, 1887). In an 1885 case of attempted suicide by Sungareah, who had been held at the lunatic asylum after multiple suicide attempts, the Inspector of Immigrants urged caution in breaking his contract and sending him back to India, because he feared this would become a precedent for other immigrant cases and lead to more suicide attempts (Minutes of the Executive Council 1880 to 1891, March 19, 1885, CO 298/38). The figures for the number of suicides during the nineteenth century in Trinidad are not readily available, so we don’t know how frequent Indian suicide was (Trotman 1986, 157). There is however anecdotal evidence that it may have been relatively frequent. A note in *Fair Play* from 1882, for example, remarked on an incident in Shine’s Pasture, in the environs of Port of Spain, where an Indian had been found hung. The note’s author was moved to remark that, “The frequency with which Coolies hang themselves in this City is becoming worthy of special notice” (*Fair Play*, March 9, 1882).

<sup>22</sup> POSG, July 8, 1865.

<sup>23</sup> “Another East Indian Murder,” POSG, November 11, 1906.

cremated but had to be buried, and so remain on the island, in being reincarnated they would be reborn not in Trinidad, but in India. They may have seen death not as “absorption” or a release to some “eternal bliss,” but potentially as a return home.<sup>24</sup>

We will likely never know for sure whether Indian indentured laborers saw suicide, or death more generally, as a means of escape from Trinidad back to India. However, the narrative of the Endeavour Estate suicide and the other examples suggest some of the ways life on the plantation in Trinidad, far from home, may have shaped Indians’ conceptions of the afterlife. It seems plausible that during the nineteenth century at least some—when Trinidad and the trials of plantation life were new and Indians had only just begun to make a home for themselves on the island—imagined death in this way, as a mode of escape home to India. The dehumanizing context of the plantation, however, not only shaped Indian ideas of the afterlife but also was fed into the dehumanizing discourse on obeah, which allowed colonial elites to downplay unpalatable trends, such as continued and rising violence on plantations, that potentially threatened the economic foundation of the colony.

## II. Murderers, Graveyards, and Effective Spirits

When Indians came to Trinidad they brought with them different regional and local spirit and healing traditions, including naga,<sup>25</sup> jinn,<sup>26</sup> bhut,<sup>27</sup> and jharay,<sup>28</sup> which in certain ways

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<sup>24</sup> An analogous case to the Indian indenture situation would be that of African slaves’ changing perceptions of death and the afterlife on plantation colonies in the Americas. African slaves made connection between suicide and a return/flight back to Africa, although it is unclear if these were concepts held by those committing suicide or by later generations interpreting histories of suicide among slave ancestor (Snyder 2010; Piersen 1977). For example, Maureen Warner-Lewis collected different oral history narratives and traditions of African Trinidadian ideas relating to the notion held by Africans that they would return to Africa with death. She narrates an account of a late nineteenth century work stoppage among Africans on the Harmony Hall Estate: “A work stoppage of three days occurred among Africans [which was caused]...when a man, returning to his hut to discover his wife had been raped by the overseer, called his countrymen together, and, in their midst, flew back to Guinea” (Adderley 2006, 216-217). Adderley speculates that this story of flying home to Africa may indicate that the African worker had killed his wife in jealousy or anger, and then killed himself, and this narrative of rape/murder/suicide may have been remembered by later generations as a story of flying back to Guinea/Africa (Ibid.).

continued to inform their lives and ideas of illness, death, and the afterlife. After arriving in Trinidad, though, Indians quickly became immersed in the spirit worlds already present. Indians began to translate their own spirit traditions and ideas of healing into these new spirit idioms, but also to borrow from the already existing healing and spirit working practices available to them, particularly those of African Trinidadians. They adapted, supplemented, and reworked older and newer (to them) cultural materials and practices in their present contexts, in cooperation and competition with their neighbors. The cultural materials newly incorporated included superhuman beings such as soucouyant, loupgarou, and jumbies. These beings are frequently translated as vampires, werewolves, and ghosts respectively; however, such translations elide the specific cultural connotations and practices associated with these beings. Jumbies, for instance, as spirits of the dead,<sup>29</sup> were frequently associated with obeah, and there were specific ways in which they were invoked and managed: ritual specialists (called obeahmen or women in the press and by those who wished to disassociate themselves from such practices) were said to catch and control such spirits in order to put them to specific uses, like causing illness or misfortune, but also for telling the future, discovering the cause or cure of illness, or finding lost objects.

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<sup>25</sup> Naga are snake spirits, usually associated with water sources like springs or rivers.

<sup>26</sup> My interlocutors in Trinidad told me jinn are a class of beings mentioned in the Quran that were made by Allah from smokeless fire. They are said to have free will and so can be malevolent, neutral, or benevolent.

<sup>27</sup> Bhut are ghosts, often malevolent.

<sup>28</sup> Jharay is the “sweeping” away of sickness with dube grass or a peacock feather, or the recitation of prayer, a mantra, or sura from the Quran coupled with blowing on the patient. The practice of jharay, like the interaction with being like jinn and bhut, cross assumed religious lines. For instance, the Clarkes, who did their ethnographic field work in 1964, record in a note in their journal on the largely Indian Trinidadian Duncan Village, near Debe, that one of their interlocutors remembered an Indian Trinidadian catechist doing jharay over African Trinidadian children in the village in the 1920s (Clarke and Clarke 2010, 137-138).

<sup>29</sup> The Herskovitses found differing opinions on exactly what a jumbie was when they did their fieldwork in Trinidad in 1939. Some reported jumbies to be a morally neutral spirits of the dead that had been woken from a peaceful rest. Others understood jumbies to be evil spirits of the dead, or demonic emanations (Herskovits and Herskovits 1947, 234-235). While “jumbie” applied to all spirits of the dead, they wrote that it was also unclear what the relationship was between the jumbie, the soul, and the “shadow” (a third spirit category used in Toco, where they did their work) (Ibid, 163-164). However, as they point out, “Definitions and distinctions of supernatural forces are never a theme on which the ethnographer looks for uniformity of view” (Ibid, 16).

Today jumbies are for many Indian Trinidadians a normal part of the spirit landscape of the island, but it seems that even relatively early on Indians were adopting African Trinidadian spirit worlds. For instance, in 1868 Kisnaram, an Indian laborer, was indicted for murdering “a fellow-countryman named Hurrie.” The accused and his wife, along with Hurrie, the paper reported, had been laborers together on the Ressource Estate in Arima. The proprietor of the estate, Martial Louis, put Kisnaram in charge of the estate when he left for Holy Week, and he testified that when he returned briefly he saw the victim and the defendant together. He left again and when he returned on Easter Tuesday he could not find either man. The defendant, when he finally appeared, told Louis that he had been “sleeping at a Congo-man’s house” and that Hurrie had left the estate soon after the proprietor on Saturday. Louis testified that “After he said this Kisnaram began to cry, and, in answer to the question of what’s the matter? said ‘all night can’t sleep, big jumbee come make bad, bad.’” The proprietor told him to tell him what had happened and to not be afraid. He then confessed to killing Hurrie. Kisnaram’s wife testified that Hurrie had come to their house while Kisnaram was out fetching water, and was “taking improper liberties” with her when Kisnaram returned. He grabbed a piece of wood and beat Hurrie to death. The police later found the body in a shallow grave on the estate.<sup>30</sup>

This case brings up several issues. The first one is sexual violence and its effects. The ratio of Indian men to women in Trinidad during the indenture period was highly skewed towards men,<sup>31</sup> which led to contentious sexual competition, domestic abuse, and murder.<sup>32</sup> This case also brings up interactions between Indians and Africans. We cannot know what Kisnaram

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<sup>30</sup>“Supreme Criminal Court,” POSG, June 10, 1868.

<sup>31</sup> Between 1845 and 1917, 64 percent of adults brought as laborers from India were adult males, and only 25 percent were adult females (Mohammed 2002, 38). Because of the general gender imbalance among all recruits, polyandry was variously practiced throughout the indentured labor diaspora (Niranjana 2006, 68).

<sup>32</sup> Most murders committed by Indians (all men) during the years 1872 to 1880 were of Indian women (Trotman 1986, 170).

was doing at the “Congo-man’s house.” The Congo man may have been his friend, advising him in this impossible and tragic situation. However, it was also the case that people identified with the Congo ethnic group in Trinidad, and across the Caribbean, were thought to have knowledge of offensive spirit working, often understood as “obeah,” including an expertise in catching graveyard spirits like jumbies and forcing them to do their will.<sup>33</sup> Which brings us to the third point, the “jumbee” Kisnaram was reported to have mentioned after his act of murder. The Congo man, then, could have been someone with ritual expertise to whom Kisnaram could have gone to for help with managing the potentially vengeful and dangerous spirit, the jumbie, which he had just unleashed in his own act of vengeful violence. Regardless of whether the “Congo-man” was an “obeahman,” this case shows that Indians were beginning to imagine and make sense of their specific contexts—such as the conditions on plantations that resulted from and in sexual competition and violence—using the local spirit traditions available to them, such as imagining vengeful spirits of the dead as jumbies.

This notion that the ghosts of those who met a violent death were dangerous and were destined to wander the earth was a commonly held conception during the colonial period. These ghosts seem to have made up their own class of spirit. For instance, in an 1896 *Port of Spain Gazette* article on wife murders among Indians, a reporter wrote that he had heard “coolie murderers” before the scaffold consoling themselves by saying:

by their being hung, no blood is spilt over their bodies through gaping wounds, therefore death in that manner would not exclude them from being happy in other world [sic]; but the person murdered, being disfigured by wounds and blood, could not be received in happiness and would therefore have to wander as evil spirits over the earth.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Warner-Lewis 2003, ch. 6. On the history and complexity of the moral spectrum of Afro-Cuban religion, on which Reglas de Congo are situated on the negative end, see Palmie 2002, ch. 2.

<sup>34</sup> “Brutal Murder. A Coolie Hacks a Woman to Death,” POSG, December 17, 1896.

The paper suggested that this account of the creation of wandering ghosts was one the murderers told to comfort themselves: that their victims would not find rest in death, perhaps would not reincarnate, and would remain on earth to harass the living, but they, the murderers, would find some kind of peace in death beyond this world. If this summary is accurate and reflected wider views, these wandering and vengeful spirits were not simply jumbies.

The weapon of choice/convenience for many assaults and murders on plantations was the cutlass or machete, so murder victims were often lacerated and bleeding at their deaths. In the above account, the creation of such evil, wandering spirits depended in part on the presence of blood, which many Hindus consider impure, as well as the integrity of the body of the person killed. In North India a “bad death” is generally considered one that is uncontrolled and involuntary, often a violent death or an accident of some kind. A bad death can also be that of a person whose body “does not constitute a fit sacrificial object,” a body which is deformed or disfigured.<sup>35</sup> As with a sacrificial offering, the body of the deceased should ideally be whole and without blemish.<sup>36</sup> The presence of polluting bodily fluids at a person’s passing are also associated with sin and a bad death.<sup>37</sup> In Indian folk traditions surrounding the deification of the dead (the creation of spirits that continue to interact with humans), human death is usually reimagined as being superhuman if the person has had an unusual death, and it is very often a violent death that converts a human being into a superhuman being.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that Indians in Trinidad were not simply adopting local spirit traditions wholesale. The wandering spirits described here were not simply jumbies, though they undoubtedly in some sense were that; but

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<sup>35</sup> Parry 1994, 162-163. In South India also when someone who dies a sudden death, from an accident or murder, and therefore has not had time to prepare for death, the spirit of the person is thought to remain on earth as a malicious ghost (Peyer 2004, 38-39).

<sup>36</sup> Parry 1994, 171.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 160-161; Jarow, 2003, 54. Parry writes that “[c]onsistent with this premium on physical perfection, perhaps, is a certain predilection for forms of violence aimed at disfiguring one’s enemies [during battle]” (Parry 1994, 171).

<sup>38</sup> Blackburn, 1985, 258, 260.

they also reflected Hindu ideas, sensibilities, and histories relating to purity, pollution, and the afterlife. These articulations of new spirit landscapes in Trinidad reflect complex and irregular processes of translation, transformation, and adaptation that were occurring under the violent pressures of the plantation.

At the same time that Indians adapted and integrated Trinidadian spirit worlds with the fragmented spirit worlds they brought with them, Indians themselves became integrated into wider Trinidadian spirit traditions. The ghosts of dead Indians not only haunted Indians, but were part of a wider shared imaginary. For instance, in one obeah case, in which the Creole John Singuineau was charged with obtaining a sum from Mary Phillip by the assumption of supernatural power (or obeah), the offending spirits involved were reportedly “coolie” spirits.<sup>39</sup> However, not only their spirits but Indians’ bodies, too, were literally incorporated into Trinidadian spirit working traditions. The graveyard was and still is an important site for spirit work in Trinidad. There were reports in the papers of people burning candles, digging holes, and burying objects at graves,<sup>40</sup> and people charged with obeah at times were found with alleged grave dirt and even human bones.<sup>41</sup> Such work in cemeteries was thought to be a part of a process of procuring spirits that could then be harnessed to do the spirit worker’s bidding.<sup>42</sup> One major change for most Indians’ management of the dead was that, as mentioned, they were not able to cremate their dead, but had to bury them, leading to new funerary and spirit traditions.

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<sup>39</sup> “An Alleged Obeah Case,” POSG, July 12, 1913.

<sup>40</sup> In one case a hole was dug in Charles Gale’s grave and “a piece of blue wax candle, inscribed with a woman’s name and a coin stuck on the end of the same” put in (“Chaguanas,” POSG, July 31, 1901).

<sup>41</sup> For example, a “respectably dressed dark coloured woman of middle age,” the wife of a schoolmaster, reportedly attempted to “intimidate” through the assumption of supernatural powers. She was caught with what was purported to be a mixture of salt, graveyard dirt, and crushed bones (“A Respectable Woman Caught Practising Obeah,” POSG, January 30, 1902). In another case, a man charged with obeah had been found with human bones on his person, among other alleged “obeah” objects (“The St. James Obeah Case,” POSG, April 13, 1902).

<sup>42</sup> E.g. there was a case from 1904 in which the accused, a “local preacher” Archibald Forbes, was said to have gone to the cemetery to allegedly “buy” a spirit to protect himself from the spirit attacks of an unknown assailant (“Amusing Obeah Case,” POSG, December 9, 1904).

There were specific techniques for catching or harnessing spirits by manipulating corpses that involved the buried bodies of Indians, and also ritual burial techniques that were thought to come specifically from India.

### III. A Corpse Facedown: Prone Burials and Embodied Histories

One set of traditions associated with Indian bodies in Trinidad was the burial of a body facedown with a whip. A case reported in Tunapuna in *The Port of Spain Gazette* in 1901, during the indenture period, involved the disturbance of the grave of a man named Bhukal (or Boocal). Bhukal had been murdered and buried six months prior to the incident. After the grave was disturbed, the *Gazette* reported that part of his jaw had been removed, as well as three of his teeth, and “the long coil of hair usually worn by a particular caste of India. The whip also, which in accordance with an old Indian superstition had been buried with the body of the man Bhukal was missing.”<sup>43</sup> The paper *The Mirror*, in contradistinction, reported that while the grave had been disturbed, it was only rumor that the jaw, hair, and whip were removed. However, the article did state that “[Bhukal] was buried at Tunapuna according to a certain peculiar Indian custom, face downward with a horse whip in his hand, the idea being that he would haunt his murderer and force him to confess.”<sup>44</sup>

How other groups (and Indians themselves) situated Indians’ bodies, ghosts, and histories within shared spirit traditions in Trinidad was constrained by local contexts and existing traditions, but also opened up new possibilities for imagining and doing those traditions. Indians’ bodies were literally made a part of Trinidadian spirit working practices, as grave robbers removed appendages from Indian corpses (or stories, at least, of such practices circulated).

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<sup>43</sup> “A Grave Re-opened,” POSG, June 17, 1901.

<sup>44</sup> “Day by Day,” *The Mirror*, June 17, 1901.

Specific traditions about the efficacy of Indian ghosts requiring the robbery of Indian graves arose based on local understandings of Indian ontologies and Indian customs, such as those related to caste. Specific spirit working practices also arose, such as the modified prone burial with a whip, which were understood to be specifically Indian in origin or performed by Indians.

Some of these reported practices, though, were apparently more broadly shared. The burial of victims of murder face down with instruments like knives to effect revenge on the perpetrator of the murder was reportedly done by African Trinidadians as well.<sup>45</sup> While prone burial, or burial face down, has been performed in Europe,<sup>46</sup> West Africa,<sup>47</sup> and India,<sup>48</sup> it is unclear what relation prone burial in Trinidad had to such discourses and practices from these “homelands.” Such practices in all three places were apparently meant to contain evil spirits like vampires, witches, or ghosts, to prevent them from rising from the grave and afflicting the living, while the exact opposite was thought to be true of purported cases of prone burial in Trinidad. While actors in Trinidad might have been drawing on traditions that could be traced back to any (or a combination) of these places (and it would be impossible to say for sure), they were clearly reengineering these techniques and narratives of their use in the new context of Trinidad, in the service of their present interests and concerns. Trinidadians’ reformulations of these practices

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<sup>45</sup> “Items of News,” POSG, March 9, 1909.

<sup>46</sup> Archeological evidence shows that prone burial or burial face down occurred in Europe, and the practice was usually associated with violent death or it was thought to stop a person suspected of being a vampire from rising from the grave (Daniell 1997, 109; Barber, 1988, 46).

<sup>47</sup> Prone burial was also practiced in West Africa, where the bodies of accused witches were buried face down to prevent their spirits from afflicting the living, and it was also possibly practiced to a limited degree among slaves in the West Indies (Handler 1996).

<sup>48</sup> In India, besides Muslim and other non-Hindu burial traditions, some Hindus are not cremated but buried after death, particularly when their deaths are set apart in some way, either because they were already “divine” deaths (in the case of smallpox, the deceased is taken by the smallpox goddess Shitala) or because the deceased, as in the case of small children or ascetics, was outside ritual life (Michaels 2004, 147). Traditions of face down burials are also found in India as well, and they are also associated with the constraining of malevolent spirits. The churail, also called a jakhin in the Deccan, is a malevolent, wandering spirit of a woman, usually one who has died during child birth. Spirit working knowledge in India holds that to prevent a churail from wandering, the body of the dead woman should be buried face down rather than be cremated (Sutherland 1991, 145-146; Gazetteer, 1884, 526 n. 1). The tradition of the churail was brought with Indians to Trinidad.

reflected specific situations of plantation violence, unsolved murders, and the desecration of sacred spaces. Trinidad's prone burial, liberating an angry spirit to pursue those who wronged the individual in life, appears to have been a ritual of revenge, a way to seek justice for disturbing violence in a society founded on violence, both overt and subtle.

In another case, this from Tacarigua in 1929, over a decade after the end of the indenture scheme, an Indian man named Chuneé's grave in an Indian cemetery was disturbed and his skull was removed. The rumors in the area were that "obeah," alternately described by some local residents as "Hindoo mysticism," was the motivation for the grave's disturbance. Reportedly there had been other grave robberies, and all the men whose heads were stolen, including Chuneé's, were members of the same "caste." The skulls, and through them the spirits, of members of this caste, it was thought, were particularly prized by "obeahmen" for their extreme efficacy. In India, the paper stated, the bodies of members of this caste had to be cremated so "the evilly inclined 'obeahman'" would not be able to get his hands on them. The paper explained that in Trinidad, the obeahman, or "science man," believed that by taking the head, he could draw the dead man's spirit and make it do his bidding, and that this particular class of spirit was popularly thought to not stop until it had succeeded. The paper, however, described a turnaround of sorts, "obeah" used to fight "obeah." After the robbery, Chuneé's relatives reburied his body face down, so that rather than his ghost doing the bidding of the grave robber, it would instead get its revenge, haunting the robber relentlessly.<sup>49</sup>

Subalterns often argued with the colonial regime and amongst themselves over the categorization of their practices as obeah and, given the jail time and fines that accompanied an obeah conviction, there was quite a bit at stake in such arguments. In the recategorization of this particular practice of grave robbing and spirit servitude as "Hindoo mysticism," and its

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<sup>49</sup> "The Mystic East in Trinidad," *The Trinidad Guardian*, September 21, 1929.

practitioner as a “science man,” we see evidence that some subalterns contested the understanding of this kind of spirit work as “obeah.” Obeah was used to categorized subaltern modes of knowledge as failed, mixed, and unsanctioned. The category “science,” though, would make such modes of knowledge and their specialists correct, authoritative, and licit. Obeah was understood to be primitive superstition. Hinduism, on the other hand, was a recognized religion in Trinidad, and “mysticism” deflected focus from the gross materiality of this purported act of the ritual removal and manipulation of human remains. We might think of the subsequent counter-ritual though, the reburial of the body facedown, as a further contestation of this practice of spirit capture (whether obeah or mysticism, science or superstition) and its embedded histories.

Ghosts are not just the ephemeral remnants of dead individuals, but social beings, the past (dis)embodied, interfering with the living in the present. Avery Gordon, in her Ghostly Matters, describes the state of being haunted as being “tied to historical and social effects.”<sup>50</sup> The technique of catching jumbies (or other spirits of the dead) and making them do a ritual specialist’s bidding has analogues in various Caribbean contexts, and there are somewhat similar folk Tantra practices, “feeding skulls,” in India as well. These often involve a ritual specialist taking bones, often skulls, from a cemetery and keeping them in a container of some kind, in order to imprison and harness their spirits.<sup>51</sup> In Cuban Palo Monte, part of Reglas de Congo, the “tata nganga,” or “father” of the ritual vessel containing the spirits (and their mortal remains, among other objects), as Palmié describes it, commands a “labor force” of spirits “bound by contract or capture.” The symbolism of the rituals surrounding the nganga evokes (and invokes)

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<sup>50</sup> Gordon 2008, 190.

<sup>51</sup> For the case of Palo Monte in Cuba, see Palmié 2002 and Pichler 2010; for Vodou in Haiti see Dayan 1995 and McAlister 1995. For analogous examples of the “feeding of skulls” in Indian folk Tantra see McDaniel 2004.

a past of forced labor and violence in the Atlantic world.<sup>52</sup> In Haiti, the zombi is a spirit captured by a ritual specialist, often imprisoned in a bottle, and forced to work.<sup>53</sup> The zombi is also a social entity born from histories of the Middle Passage, slavery, and revolution, which, as Dayan describes it, “tells the story of colonization.”<sup>54</sup> These Caribbean stories of enslaved ghosts and their ritual models of spiritual capture and forced labor articulated histories of slavery into ritual idioms. If we think of the possibility of ritual as not only, following Shaw, a kind of “practical memory,”<sup>55</sup> but, as Palmié puts it, as a subaltern “historiography and social analysis” articulated in a “language of practice,”<sup>56</sup> what sorts of historiographies were being embodied in the above ghost story of ritual enslavement and subsequent counter-ritual revenge?

People in Trinidad, both Indian and African, captured spirits in order to bind them to do work for them. It was a kind of spirit possession, but ultimately the spirit did not possess the ritual specialist, the ritual specialist possessed the spirit.<sup>57</sup> We can use the models of the nfumbi, the spirit captured in the nganga, and the zombi, the spirit captured in the bottle, to conceptualize the catching of jumbies in Trinidad as a crystallization in ritual form of New World histories of slavery.<sup>58</sup> Such a history of dehumanizing bound service, or at least its ritual metaphor, would

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<sup>52</sup> Palmié 2002, 167-176. On the metaphor of slavery in Afro-Atlantic religions, see Matory 2007.

<sup>53</sup> McAlister 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Dayan 1995, 37. McAlister refers to the zombi’s bottle as a “crystalized history lesson” (McAlister 1995, 320).

<sup>55</sup> Shaw 2002, 7-8.

<sup>56</sup> Palmié 2002, 191.

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly the term “possession” has a negative connotation in Trinidad. Demons and other morally negative entities “possess” people, while morally good spirits “manifest.”

<sup>58</sup> Melville Herskovits, writing in his field diary from his trip to Trinidad in 1939, noted that the word for jumbie in Trinidadian patois was “zombi” (Herskovits, Melville. “Trinidad Field Trip Diary,” July 18, 1939, p. 47, Folder 82, Box 15, in the Herskovits papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library). This suggests, beyond the analogical argument being forwarded here, the complex historical connections between these entities. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the etymology of both jumbie and zombi to the Kongo language (“jumby, n.” OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/102022?redirectedFrom=jumbie> (accessed September 30, 2013); “zombie, n.” OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/232982> (accessed September 30, 2013)).

have undoubtedly resonated for Indian laborers. In India, many were “kidnapped and cajoled”<sup>59</sup> into coming to Trinidad. As laborers they were then bound by their contracts to work on plantations. If they left without permission, they could be jailed for months and still had to make up that lost time as part of their contracts. As colonial subjects they were bound over even after their indenture contracts were fulfilled, beholden to free-papers and anti-vagabondage laws. On the other hand, if death had been imagined, at least by some, as a kind of freedom, or a release from such a life of servitude (as was suggested by the case of the murder/suicide above and African American narratives of “people who could fly”), to have one’s grave robbed of its mortal remains, to be made into a jumbie, imprisoned, and forced to work (whether as a slave or under contract) meant one would not be free even in death. However, in Trinidad this situation, it was thought, could be turned around if the family of the deceased manipulated the body even further, burying it facedown, perhaps with a whip, to send the spirit to get its revenge on its captors.

This reminds us that the ghosts in such stories, as well as their narrators, were not passive carriers of history, just as slaves and other unfree laborers did not passively bear their enslavement, but in great and small ways inhabited and resisted their life’s predicament. We do not want to reduce the practice of manipulating jumbies to simply a recapitulation of metaphors of enslavement. Palmié argues, for instance, in the case of Palo Monte, that the *nganga* complex in Cuba not only “condenses” historical experiences of violence but also resistance and retaliation.<sup>60</sup> As Pichler points out, the *nfumbi* represents both the state of enslavement and great power.<sup>61</sup> Further, the invocation of spirits was not only a witness to historical trauma, but as Winter describes in the case of the resurgence of spiritualism in Europe during World War I, also

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Kale 1998, 135.

<sup>60</sup> Palmié 2002, 176.

<sup>61</sup> Pichler 2010, 146.

a mode of coping with trauma and loss.<sup>62</sup> In as far as the ritual taking of skulls reflected and repurposed histories of unfree labor, of enslavement and then indenture in Trinidad, then we might think of the response, prone burial, as an idealized undoing of that history, doing in ritual what would have been extremely difficult during slavery or indenture.<sup>63</sup> If we may think of ghosts not only as a return of the past, but also as “historical revisionism” or the resurgence of “repressed histories,”<sup>64</sup> then as a counter to ritual jumbie internment we might think of the prone burial and its revenging ghosts as revisionist history. The body was buried prone in this story not to avenge a murder perpetrated in life but post-mortem violence. In this story, the family of the deceased turned the whip against the slave master;<sup>65</sup> they set histories of resistance against histories of enslavement. Yet both reflected subaltern rituals, narratives, and histories. And they were both referred to by some as “obeah.” Like the dead and their revenants dis- and reassembled by turns, histories were invoked, reconfigured, and re-membered in ritual and narrative in the service of present interests and commenting on present contexts of colonial subjection, power, and violence, ritual and otherwise.

#### (In)Conclusion

So-called witchcraft (and/or its popular imagination) has been intertwined with state power (and/or its popular imagination) in the Caribbean.<sup>66</sup> Similar to what Diana Paton has

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<sup>62</sup> Winter 1995, 54.

<sup>63</sup> There were few options for “escape” or revenge on plantations, though certainly some did escape from Trinidad, fleeing to Venezuela for instance, and slaves and indentured laborers attacked overseers as well; and unfree laborers shirked work, though this could lead to corporal punishment for slaves, and for Indians got them thrown in jail.

<sup>64</sup> Huggan 1998, 129.

<sup>65</sup> The whip did not end with slavery. For example, the Summary Convictions ordinance outlawing obeah, or “the assumption of supernatural powers,” included the possibility of a male prisoner being whipped as part of his punishment (Laws of Trinidad and Tobago Vol III 1884, 80). An obeah case from the early twentieth century counted among the offending “evil spirits” involved a “Whip Spirit” (“Amusing Obeah Case”, POSG, December 30, 1904). There is also the Carnival Mas character the Jab Jab, a devil with a cracking whip. These suggest spirits with whips were a more widely held set of spirits operating in Trinidad.

<sup>66</sup> For the case of Cuba see Routon 2010.

pointed out in the case of nineteenth century Jamaica,<sup>67</sup> in Trinidad “obeah” was often activated to counter colonial state power, for instance to influence or overthrow court cases. And state (or quasi-state) power could be invoked to counter obeah.

Manipulating spirits was thought to be powerful and dangerous work, wrapped up, as it was, in histories of enslavement, murder, and other violence. And the accusation of attack through the agency of spirits was also deadly serious.<sup>68</sup> In a case from 1902, two men from Tunapuna, Peerah and Niermal, had a quarrel (we are not told about what). Peerah then accused Niermal of sending jumbies in revenge to his house, and in so doing making the members of his household ill. Peerah then called a panchayat—an “Indian” village council, usually made up of five elder men, meant among other things to make collective decisions and mediate disputes—to bring Niermal to justice for his supposed spirit working. He threatened to beat him if he did not show up. In further retaliation, Niermal then went to the police court in Tunapuna to ask the judge to issue a warrant for Peerah’s arrest for menacing him. In court, Niermal (to the apparent amusement of those present) related his story and denied that he had sent any jumbies. The judge told him he could not be compelled to attend the panchayat and that if Peerah threatened him again he could lay charges against him.<sup>69</sup>

Indians tried to recreate Indian institutions like the panchayat, reimagined in Trinidad, to mediate conflicts, apparently including accusations of spirit attack. In this case, however, Niermal turned the situation around, appealing to a higher authority, the colonial police court, to adjudicate both the jumbie accusation set against him and the authority of the panchayat to compel him to appear and be judged for his alleged jumbie working. While he denied sending

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<sup>67</sup> Paton 2004, 184.

<sup>68</sup> People allegedly killed one another over obeah working claims (for example, “The Condemned Men,” POSG, June 21, 1899).

<sup>69</sup> “Tunapuna,” POSG, April 27, 1902; “Tunapuna,” *The Mirror*, April 28, 1902

spirits against Peerah, Niermal opened the possibility that he might send the police after him instead.

Subalterns' shared practices of imagining, managing, and contesting spirit worlds in Trinidad drew from a range of cultural resources, including traditions from India, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Particular iterations of those worlds reflected the particular histories of the groups involved, including histories of the state backed and perpetrated violence of forced servitude, which helped to make slaves of millions of human beings and ghosts of those slaves. Indians and Africans, separately and together, articulated and reworked such worlds and their practices in their specific contexts in the service of their particular interests in the present. We don't know whether Niermal invoked the jumbies. But there were other superhuman (if not supernatural) powers that were clearly invoked. Peerah invoked a body from an Indian past, attempting to harness the alternative institutional authority of the panchayat to counter alleged Trinidadian spirit attacks in the present. To counter this and escape this predicament, Niermal invoked the colonial state, the most powerful producer of and final authority for the discourse on obeah. The invocation, the conjuration, of colonial state power and its violence, something at which Indians became more adept over the course of the colonial period, was ultimately the strongest obeah.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> However, one of my interlocutors in Trinidad, an African Trinidadian Spiritual Baptist who actually referred to his ritual harnessing of jumbies as "obeah," told me that "we" (he did not clarify who the "we" referred to) used "obeah" to undo the very statutes that outlawed obeah, inducing its legalization after the colonial period's end (Interview, December 14, 2011).

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