“SUPERSTITION IS THE OFFSPRING OF IGNORANCE,” THE SUPPRESSION
OF AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE BRITISH CARIBBEAN, 1650-1834

by

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the suppression of the enslaved spiritual practice, Obeah, through African slavery in the British Caribbean from 1650-1834. Obeah is a syncretic spiritual practice derived from West African religious epistemologies. Practitioners of Obeah invoked the spiritual world for healing, divination, and protection. What is more, under the constant threat of colonial violence, they practiced Obeah for insurrectionary purposes. This thesis reveals and contextualizes the many ways in which Obeah faced cultural suppression at the hands of religious, colonial, and imperial authorities as a means to comply with and respond to sociopolitical conflicts occurring within the British Empire. British writers conceived of Obeah as ‘ignorant’ superstition and used this against Africans as justification for their subjugation by the British empire. Furthermore, this project traces the development of the English concern for Obeah alongside their pre-existing conceptions of magic and religion, which influenced the ways in which British colonists confronted African practitioners.
Dedication

For my grandparents, Claus and Linda.
Acknowledgements

I believe there is a common misconception about graduate work in history— it is not a solitary endeavor. The last two years have been marked by imposter syndrome, waves of dejection, and unrelenting historical curiosity. Unfortunately, these things on their own do not produce a completed thesis. Therefore, I am deeply grateful and humbled by the familial community back home, and my adopted community here at the University of New Brunswick. Every day of the last two years I have been incredibly lucky to be supported and inspired by those friends, family, and faculty who are determined to see me succeed.

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Introduction

In the late-night hours of April 7th, 1760, a small group of enslaved Coromantee Africans assembled on Frontier Estate in St. Mary’s Parish, Jamaica, setting into motion one of the greatest slave revolts in the eighteenth-century British Empire. Led by a former Coromantee chief, Tacky, the insurrection spread to neighbouring parishes where the rebels consulted an African spiritual priest or “Obeahman.” The Obeahman claimed invincibility against British weapons and dispersed a protective powder to the rebels; for his role in the insurrection, the Obeahman was hanged.¹ After months of fighting, the insurrection resulted in the deaths of 60 whites, £100,000 in damages, and the execution or transportation of 300-400 enslaved individuals.² Immediately following the rebellion, the Jamaican legislature drafted “An Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves”, which for the first time in the British Caribbean, explicitly prohibited the practice of Obeah. White lawmakers documented Obeah as a dangerous form of witchcraft or sorcery within the text of the Act – drawing on European notions of magic and spirituality from centuries prior.³ Therefore, Obeah provoking Jamaican legislators to draw on European witchcraft lore presents questions as to why and how Obeah was suppressed during African slavery in the Caribbean, and whether there were other contextual factors at work.

² Ibid, 462.
³ An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760, in CO 139/21, The National Archives, UK
Most academic scholarship on Obeah begins with Tacky’s War as the start to Obeah’s centuries-long suppression. This thesis, however, will situate Obeah within the context of religion, slavery, and colonization in the British Atlantic world from 1650 to 1834. It will reveal and contextualize the many ways in which Obeah faced cultural suppression at the hands of religious, colonial, and imperial authorities as a means to comply with and respond to sociopolitical conflicts occurring within the British Empire. It will also show how English writers conceived of Obeah by comparison with their own beliefs about religion and magic, and the shifting approach to prosecution of witchcraft in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

When Obeah was used to aid the insurrection in Tacky’s War, it was not the first act of preternatural practitioning in the British Caribbean colonies. While 1760 in Jamaica marks the practice’s most visible event, Obeah had been practiced for over a century. Obeah is a Creole spiritual practice developed and cultivated among enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The practice was expressed in two forms: first through the invocation of spells for protection, harming enemies, divination, or bringing good fortune; second, by incorporating African-derived healing based on herbalist knowledge. Obeah was a product of creolization — a process in which enslaved Africans of various ethnic groups reconfigured and adapted cultural

systems and expressions under the pressure of colonial powers and threat of violence, creating and preserving a new cultural system.⁵

When English slave traders brought Africans to the Caribbean after the settlement of Barbados in 1627, the enslaved carried with them their preconceived notions of how the spiritual world existed alongside the physical world. Specifically, many Africans understood the living and the dead to include ancestral and malevolent spirits and distant Gods that could operate in the corporeal world to varying degrees. In most African cultures, ritual specialists or spiritual practitioners existed to contact and manipulate the spiritual world for socially beneficial goals like improving physical and spiritual health, divination, and protection. At times, they also sought socially negative goals that were interpreted and translated by Europeans as forms of poisoning or causing madness and delusion.⁶ When encountering the effects of Obeah in the British Caribbean, including ill slaves, practicing tools, and poisons, colonists sought to understand and respond to them. In doing so, they incorporated Obeah into European epistemologies. Obeah thus drew on

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European ideas of dangerous spirituality, science, and skepticism. This was likely exacerbated by the fact that the formation of Obeah in the Caribbean coincided with the most intense period of witch-hunting in England in the seventeenth century.

Witchcraft lore has existed in some form in almost every culture in history. However, the severity of the persecution surrounding the European witch-hunts, which spanned roughly from the late 1420s to the middle of the seventeenth century, and which left an estimated 50,000-60,000 women and men dead through judicial processes, remains unmatched. Most Europeans predicated their beliefs in witchcraft and the supernatural on Christian theology. They imagined a complex demonic hierarchy established to mimic and oppose God’s divine will. Witches were believed to act as intermediaries, similar to Obeah practitioners, between the human world and the supernatural; their intentions, however, were thought to be mostly malicious. Throughout the witch-hunts in the British Isles, it is estimated that the executions for the crime of witchcraft reached 2,000 people, although the majority of these were in Scotland. England’s history with witchcraft manifested slightly differently from the diabolic-centric witch-hunts commonly seen on the European continent, although the Essex trials of the 1640s reflected influence from the continent.

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10 Ibid, 2-3.
From the 1540s to the 1730s, English laws criminalized the practice of witchcraft and sorcery, including the invocation of spirits. English witch-hunting saw its height in the 1640s when hundreds of individuals were executed for violating the witchcraft statues and causing misfortune, sickness, injury, or death.\(^{12}\) By the late seventeenth century, many English elites were becoming skeptical of witchcraft beliefs and tiring of the trials. New approaches to science and naturalistic explanations for preternatural events were also contributing to the challenging of witchcraft belief on several levels. Despite the decline in English witchcraft persecution beginning in the 1660s, popular belief in witchcraft and demonology were still very much a part of the discourse concerning religion.\(^{13}\)

Across the Atlantic, enslaved Africans introduced their own religions and traditional practices to the Caribbean plantation system. Newcomers to the British Caribbean were all culturally diverse, coming from both western European countries and sub-Saharan African societies. In slave colonies like Barbados and Jamaica, a vast majority of these newcomers were enslaved Africans from a range of ethnic groups. In these colonies, the constant threat of violence was used to regulate the daily lives of the enslaved. Anthropologist Sydney Mintz stated that it was because of these violent conditions imposed on culturally heterogeneous groups of slaves that “each society served as an

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\(^{13}\) Elmer, 243.
incubator of social innovation.” 14 This is the process of ‘creolization,’ and it was this incubator that gave birth to syncretic religious practices like Obeah. The root word ‘creole’ was most often used to distinguish children of African descent born in the Caribbean. It has since expanded to refer to food, dances, language, and religions. As a generality, ‘creole’ denotes a mixing of different cultures. 15 ‘Creolization’ is a process that is similarly associated with cultural change. However, Mintz asserts that this process is specific to the Caribbean. This is because the Caribbean slave plantations had specific effects on the enslaved Africans who were forced to endure familial alienation, cultural destruction, and constant physical and mental violence. These conditions, paired with the mixing interactions from dominant white religious and folk culture from Europeans, fundamentally changed enslaved Africans cultural and religious epistemologies. 16 In the British Caribbean, Obeah was formed through this process. In the French Caribbean colony, Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti), the syncretic religion Vodou was formed. Vodouist’s beliefs centre on a supreme creator Bondye and subservient spirits called Ion. These beliefs are descended from West African Fon religion, Vodun and similarly employ ritual healing, religious material culture, song and dance, and channelling spirits through possession. Like Obeah practitioners, Vodou priests act as intermediaries between the human and spirits worlds and use their spiritual power for both socially positive and

15 Ibid, 188.
16 Ibid, 196.
negative goals. Protestantism also moved across the Atlantic from England to the British Caribbean colonies with independent missionaries, travellers, and planters. As a result of these merging religious and cultural ideologies, African-derived spirituality, ritual practice, and religion came into conflict with the evolving colonial precedent for what an acceptable belief was, and what was potentially harmful.

This thesis questions how European ideas of magical practicing influenced the British responses to Obeah. These responses were at times implicit, for instance, using Christianity to combat ‘low superstitions.’ Also, at times, their influences were explicit, as seen when travellers directly compared Obeah belief to witchcraft trials in England and used similar language in legislation to categorize and criminalize the practice. While these similarities are traceable through the Atlantic exchange of cultures, race and slavery are two factors that prevent a direct comparative study between European maleficium and Caribbean Obeah. Obeah was considered to be a definitive marker of ‘African-ness’ and was born from African epistemologies and religious systems and, therefore, it has to be analyzed in the specific context of Caribbean slavery which dehumanized and exploited enslaved Africans for profit. Therefore, the history of Obeah is deeply embedded in wider discourses of dangerous spirituality and enslavement. This thesis, therefore, argues that Obeah was suppressed because it conflicted with British colonial ideologies that promoted particular forms of Christianity, economic interests resulting from African slavery, and European notions of civility and freedom.

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As Obeah came into conflict with colonial interests in the Caribbean, it faced many avenues for suppression. I use the term suppression in this thesis to explain the way the dominant European colonial system worked to put an end to or prevent the development of Obeah as a spiritual practice and religious system. I further ascribe to historian Joseph Marshall’s assertion that cultural suppression is intimately involved in the process of dehumanization.18 This process was necessary for the self-serving justification for slavery and the promotion of European ideas of civility and progress. The process of suppression will be analyzed through three chapters which interrogate Obeah in the British Caribbean from early English settlement in 1650 until the abolition of slavery in 1834.

Chapter one examines Christianity and supernatural beliefs from 1650 to 1740 to unravel how Protestant supremacy and growing supernatural skepticism led to early anti-Obeah rhetoric.19 Chapter two interrogates Obeah through its most common association with enslaved acts of resistance and rebellion. From 1740 until 1780, white perceptions of Obeah in the Caribbean changed drastically, from a nonsensical pagan practice to a potentially dangerous form of spirituality after Tacky’s War led to its criminalization in Jamaica. Lastly, chapter three (1780-1834) interrogates how Obeah was suppressed amidst pro- and anti-slavery debates centred on Africans’ perceived ability to be rational and civil members of British colonial society. These periods of study bring attention to Obeah’s

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19 Katherine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 2. “Protestant Supremacy” is a concept constructed to explain the “exclusive ideal of religion based on ethnicity.” Protestant supremacy is the forefather of ‘white supremacy.’
position in the much larger conversations of religious dissent, early modern spiritual beliefs, and Caribbean slave colonies.

I analyze this through a transatlantic approach that investigates the intersections among western European and African religious epistemologies, and how they functioned specifically in the Anglo-Caribbean and ultimately came into conflict with each other. The sources utilized for this project include British colonial legislation, religious authorities, and travel writers. These, in the spirit of a transatlantic study, are analyzed alongside British laws concerning witchcraft and disseminated works concerning supernatural belief and skepticism. This thesis does not expand the scope to the deep origins of African belief, or cultural conflict within Africa. Instead, the connections to Africa are assessed in this context to discover how African-derived religiosity was remade in the Caribbean and how it was used and shaped through violent socio-political conflict.

What is lost from these collected sources, however, is the voice of the enslaved peoples themselves. As a result of the colonial masters’ control over the archive, and the inability of the enslaved to document their lives, it is difficult, if not impossible, to underpin their motives, beliefs, and the importance of culture and religiosity. To discern the actions and beliefs of the enslaved, this project utilizes the aforementioned documents, produced

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by white slaveholders, British thinkers, and various colonial authorities, with what is known about Creole and African religious traditions and culture. This will reveal that the enslaved practice of Obeah came into conflict with the fundamental pillars of British colonial success in the Anglo-Caribbean. To further aid this project, the secondary literature from European, Caribbean, and Atlantic World historians has been invaluable in creating a basis for my analysis to continue the complex conversations of Obeah, witchcraft, and slavery.

**Historiography**

In the historiography of the Anglo-Caribbean, there has been significant academic scholarship which has sought to unravel some of the complexities associated with Obeah’s practice, cultural significance, criminalization, and ethnographic origins. The impressive body of literature to date largely asks, “what is Obeah and where does it come from?” “What do prosecutions for Obeah look like?” and, “how does Obeah function in Caribbean slave societies?” Through these questions, Obeah has been studied through many articulations. In particular, scholars of the Caribbean have done extensive research on Obeah in Jamaica where it was first prohibited. There has also been significant research done on Obeah persecutions and the expansion of anti-Obeah legislation, specifically in the nineteenth century. The academic literature that examines Obeah during slavery is mainly concerned with the enslaved act of resistance and traditional healing practices.

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22 Brown, 29. I situate this methodology alongside Vincent Brown’s approach of triangulation to portray Obeah both through the viewpoint of white colonials, but also asserting the cultural significance of Afro-Creole spirituality to enslaved groups.
Scholarship on Pre-1760 literature is less focused and it is typically analyzed in shorter studies or briefly mentioned as a companion to a broader analysis. There does not appear to be a lot of emerging interest in the study of Obeah before its criminalization. This leaves a gap in the historical literature. Similarly, scholarship has not paid significant attention to African religious material culture as a way to trace the development of African spiritual practices before the word "Obeah" was commonly employed. This type of work has been successful in the study of other syncretic African religions. Furthermore, the study of Obeah would benefit from putting Obeah in direct conversation with other Afro-Caribbean syncretic practices like Vodou, Santeria, and Quimbois to compare and contrast the variations of colonial suppression.

The historical literature on European magic is plentiful. Scholars have covered topics of magic and religion, gender, politics, intellectualism, and cultural variations between European territories. These histories have covered the vast time period of European magical practitioners, both pre and post witch-hunts. Recently, more academics have become increasingly aware of the lack of literature pertaining to the European encounters with other forms of magic through colonization. However, there is still less academic attention on English witchcraft beliefs outside of the British Isles, and British North America and on the effects on racialized groups. Despite the lapses in the historiographies, the established literature has another critical function: brought together,

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this scholarship gives clues to how Obeah fits into the broader histories and academic conversation pertaining to circum-Atlantic spirituality and magical practitionering.

As previously suggested, in the historical discourse on witchcraft, a significant portion of the academic literature concerns European countries and features predominantly white practitioners. Despite this, there is space for African-derived magical practitionering in Atlantic studies of witchcraft, religion, and superstition. In fact, the works focused on white European witchcraft belief can be incorporated easily with the Caribbean scholarship to improve our understandings of cross-cultural magic. These often-separate historiographies reveal that Obeah at its core belief system and practice is not entirely aberrant and unique but fits into the broader discourse concerning magic.

Magic, superstitions, and folk practitionering are global experiences that have been extensively chronicled by historians. Beliefs in witchcraft in some form have existed in cultures across the globe – so it should be of no surprise then that they would share similar structural beliefs and social functions – including Obeah and maleficium. Historian Ronald Hutton’s 2018 book *The Witch: A History of Fear from Ancient Times to the Present* is an extensively researched cross-cultural analysis of magical practitionering.

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Hutton uses a 5-point framework which he asserts apply to all cultural understandings of magic and witchcraft despite functioning within varying localities and under different socio-political conditions.\textsuperscript{26} This five-point framework is of particular interest due to the cultural similarities between European and African beliefs systems in regard to magic. First, Hutton states that witches cause harm by uncanny means, based on the belief that humans had the ability to bring about misfortune through non-natural means of magical manipulations and spiritual invocations.\textsuperscript{27} The second characteristic indicates that witches are an internal threat to the community. For Hutton, Europeans and especially the English believed that witches afflicted neighbours and kin first and foremost. Similarly, amongst rural African societies, it was a widely held belief that witches attacked those closest to them as a challenge to kinship orders. Hutton’s third characteristic states that the witch works within a tradition in which it was believed that they gained their malignant powers through either training or inheritance.\textsuperscript{28} The fourth point dictates that the witch is evil, although this does not necessarily assert that magical practitioners were regarded as entirely evil in every culture, but that under certain conditions they could be seen as a witch who was sinister and worked in direct defiance to a deity.\textsuperscript{29} Lastly, Hutton argues that across cultures it was believed that the witch could be resisted. This global belief manifests in many ways: first, through counter-magic, which could repel spells and curses. Second, through persuading the witch to remove an affliction or spell, and third, by a physical attack.

\textsuperscript{26} Hutton, 9-10.  
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 11.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 18.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 22.
resulting in the beating or murder of a witch.\textsuperscript{30} Using Hutton’s framework allows for the comparisons between European witchcraft and Afro-Caribbean Obeah to be illuminated. The academic scholarship from historians help reveal the similarities between witchcraft and Obeah. This will also help trace how European ideas of how to respond to magical practicing influenced the ways in which British colonists confronted Obeah.

Chiefly, at the core of European witchcraft lore and Afro-Caribbean Obeah, is a foundational structure predicated on Christian and African religious systems. These structures form the connection between supernatural belief and religiosity. For the English and other Europeans, the core Christian doctrine taught that God and the Devil were the primary actors locked in a battle of good and evil. Witchcraft was intimately tied to this structure, with witches acting as the Devil’s assistant performing malefic deeds and perverting God’s divine rituals through satanic inversions.\textsuperscript{31} For Afro-Creoles, Obeah engaged with a polytheistic supernatural world wherein malevolent spirits (sometimes called \textit{Duppies}) can interact with the human world, and ancestral spirits can protect, punish, and oversee the lives of their living descendants. Obeah practitioners were believed to act as human intermediaries, priests, and spiritual healers, deriving their powers from their complex supernatural world.\textsuperscript{32} These religious structures – Christian and Obeah – were not as rigid as they may appear, were able to adapt over time, and, in terms of witchcraft, shared belief systems which were incredibly malleable.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 25.
\textsuperscript{32} Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, \textit{Creole Religions of the Caribbean}, 170.
Early modern historian Richard Raiswell and medieval folklorist Peter Dendle’s work *The Devil in Society in Premodern Europe* describes the Devil in witchcraft and demonological beliefs as a complex and malleable figure in premodern societies.\(^{33}\) Raiswell and Dendle further regard the Devil as “a many-headed and wondrous being, one who is made and remade in response to context and circumstance.”\(^{34}\) Premodern Europeans understood the Devil and demonic witchcraft in response to changing social, political, and intellectual priorities, and especially as there arose in the sixteenth century competing versions of Christian spirituality. British witchcraft historian Christina Larner’s *Enemies of God* corroborates this argument. She stated that in researching Scottish witch hunting patterns, the accusations for witchcraft related crimes typically reflect their locations. For instance, if a township was located on the coast with a high fishing industry, accusations against alleged witches typically centred on their perceived power to create storms to sink ships and scare away fish. If a town had large agricultural industry, witches were believed to kill cattle and destroy crops.\(^ {35}\)

This is also true in historian Richard Godbeer’s *The Devil’s Dominion*, which examines the complicated relationship of English colonists in New England with religion and magic. Specifically, Godbeer highlights how Puritan folk magic, which included many similar practitoning elements to Obeah, such as divination and counter-magic, adapted to colonial society. Godbeer states that folk magic in New England did not stand in opposition

\(^{33}\) Dendle and Raiswell, 31.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 24.

to religious belief systems and instead filled a void between religious devotion and real life.\(^{36}\) This adaptive practice was possible, Goodbeer asserts, because religious instruction was “vague and open-ended,” thus it allowed settlers to interpret Christian faith and some magical practices as compatible.\(^{37}\)

Lenient clerical teachings are also expressed in Caribbean historian Katherine Gerbner’s *Christian Slavery* where she dispels the notion that the white planter class was irreligious, but instead argues that the church’s teachings were less formal than in England. Further, planters sought to exclude enslaved Africans from Christian teachings, and thus, some planters allowed Obeah related spirituality to exist quietly.\(^{38}\) Therefore, historians writing about European witchcraft illustrate the adaptive qualities and malleability of its religious structure and practice in a way that also rings true in the Caribbean’s in response to Obeah.

Similarly, African and African-American historian Vincent Brown examines the concept of death in Jamaica during slavery and exactly what that meant to Europeans and enslaved Africans alike. Through this analysis, Brown highlights the ways religious and cultural beliefs changed and creolized in the context of violent enslavement. Specifically, Brown underscores that as a result of the displacement and alienation of slavery, Africans enslaved in the Anglo-Caribbean adapted their beliefs about death and the afterlife.\(^{39}\) For


\(^{37}\) Ibid, 17.

\(^{38}\) Gerbner, 1-3; Vincent Brown, 145 also states that planters in Jamaica paid little attention to Obeah practices prior to 1760; Randy M. Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah: Power, Authority, and the Politics of Slave Culture in the British Caribbean.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2011): 456 has also argued this point in the case of early nineteenth century Berbice that “weak missionary presence combined with massive importation of African captives” allowed Obeah to flourish.

\(^{39}\) Brown, 4.
example, the enslaved maintained that after death their souls would be returned across the Atlantic home to Africa and join their ancestors. The malleability of African supernatural beliefs is also seen in Brown’s analysis of Obeah, especially where he states that “Africans and their descendants harnessed the dead to promote political action.” Africans brought magical talismans and utilized Obeah powers to direct political action against white captors.40 This, for the enslaved, was a necessary adaptation to the cruelties of slave plantation life as seen in Tacky’s War. Brown further argues that Obeahmen and women operated as herbalists and sages to account for the physical and spiritual needs of their communities. This was mischaracterized by white observers in the Caribbean as “witchcraft,” primarily due to Obeah’s increased affiliation which harmful poisoning and rebellion in the British Caribbean.41

Obeah, like witchcraft beliefs, shows the potential for adapting to the contexts and localities. Historians of both the Caribbean and Europe help draw these similarities and dispel the notions that magical practices tied to religious notions are one dimensional and rigid. Instead, because of their malleability, Obeah and European witchcraft are both difficult to definitively pin down and exhibit both socially positive and negative goals.

In terms of the actual practicing of magic, historians have indicated both socially positive and negative goals that can be applied to both Obeah and European witchcraft lore. In the dominant perceptions of both practices, only the socially negative goals are highlighted. For witchcraft, it is the association with heresy, diabolism, and causing death

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40 Ibid, 144.
41 Ibid, 146.
and illness. For Obeah, colonial authorities highlighted rebellion, poisoning, and delusion as the practices social negative and harmful qualities. Scholars working on both sides of the Atlantic, however, have done considerable work in dispelling old notions that magical practitionering was inherently negative. For European witchcraft, practitionering for positive purposes was categorized differently as natural, folk, sorcery, cunning-folk, or even ecclesiastical. Historian Stuart Clark’s *Thinking With Demons* shows that early modern Europeans held two dominant perceptions of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was predicated upon premodern understandings of what was possible and impossible in the natural world. Practicing natural magic could cause some phenomena to occur that appeared to conflict with what was possible in the corporeal world. Most early modern demonologists however denied that magicians could break the laws of nature, but they could make it appear as if they had, thus modern scholars tend to describe this as preternatural. Such activities included efforts to manipulate the laws of nature, access curative powers for physical and mental healing, and means to provide folk protection or counter-magic. Demonic magic differed slightly since demons existed outside of the human understanding of the cosmos. Yet most scholarly writers still affirmed that God would not grant them permission to break the laws of nature. Instead, they associated demonic magic with devil-worship in popular and learned culture. Medieval historian Richard Kieckhefer similarly makes this distinction between sorcery and devil-worshipping magic as these represented the good and bad binary of magic. While sorcerers

42 Godbeer, 26.
44 Ibid, 179.
still found themselves as victims of witchcraft allegations, they were generally seen as enemies of a specific person or group. They typically claimed that their magic was performed using invisible natural forces, not demons. Alternatively, devil-worshiping or malefic witches were inherently evil, enemies of the larger community, and often seen as attacking the social foundations of Christendom.\footnote{Richard Kieckhefer, \textit{European Witch Trials: Their Foundations In Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500.} Vol. 5. (London: Routledge, 2011), 76.} By the 1420s malefic witches were portrayed as hypersexual, evil, and heretical by engaging in nocturnal assemblies to perform sexually lewd acts, commit infanticide and renounce God. It was at the witches Sabbaths that they would plot against the larger Christian society.\footnote{Levack, 7-9.} These attributes of good and bad magic and how they were portrayed are strikingly similar to that of Obeah in the Caribbean.

In the academic literature on the Caribbean, historian Randy Browne notes that there is an apparent compulsion for historians to view Obeah as solely an act of resistance due large in part to eighteenth-century colonial portrayals.\footnote{Randy Browne, “Bad business of Obeah”, 455.} In reaction to this, Browne approaches his study of Obeah in Berbice from the bottom-up. Browne sought to focus on the role of Obeah on slaves’ lives and communities.\footnote{Ibid, 458.} In doing this, he highlights the complexities in the scholarly perception of Obeah, for many have described it as consisting entirely of altruistic healing practices. Instead, Browne contends, “Obeah helped enslaved people solve many problems, but it could also be remarkably violent and dangerous.”\footnote{Ibid, 459.}

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[46] Levack, 7-9.
\item[47] Randy Browne, “Bad business of Obeah”, 455.
\item[48] Ibid, 458.
\item[49] Ibid, 459.
\end{footnotesize}
instance, the Minje Mama dance was an Obeah ritual which featured whippings and beatings directed at anyone who interfered with the dance or challenged Obeah practitioner’s authority. This ritual caused the death of an enslaved woman in Berbice in 1821.\textsuperscript{50} Browne claims that exercises of physical violence were introduced to these Obeah ceremonies as a result of plantation environments where violence was central to the maintenance of power. This once again shows the malleability of Obeah practice.\textsuperscript{51}

Alternatively, anthropologists Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby have argued that Obeah had many socially positive goals. While Obeah practices and beliefs varied from island to island, they still held dominant traits. Obeah, Handler and Bilby argue, is particularly concerned with divination (fortune-telling), healing, bringing good fortune, and protection from harm. However, the authors later note that Obeah was at times used to malevolently harm others.\textsuperscript{52} Despite this, Handler and Bilby contend that in “many, if not most parts of the Anglo-Caribbean the supernatural/spiritual force [or forces] that the Obeah practitioner attempted to control or guide was essentially neutral but was largely directed toward what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals.”\textsuperscript{53} Further, Bilby and Handler argue that earlier scholarship which casts Obeah as one-dimensional and predominantly negative only serves to reinforce the eighteenth century and nineteenth century racist and Eurocentric views of the practice.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 451.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 459.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 155.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 157.
Scholarship, whether focused on Europe or the Caribbean, often relies heavily on the anti-social and evil perceptions of magical Practitioning. Of course, this is due to the reliance on the availability of primary source material dominated by elite Europeans which relentlessly articulates the negative, sensationalized, and negative qualities of magic. However, academic scholarship exists which seeks to dispel the static and one-dimensional understandings of Obeah and European witchcraft; and once read together, this literature reveals similar and multi-faceted Practitioning systems.

As a result of the adaptive nature of witchcraft and Obeah practices, and the complex social functions of magical Practitioning, English and Caribbean authorities had difficulties understanding how to categorize and define these practices. Historians David and Andrew Pickering use the example of healers and doctors in medieval and early modern England. Since trained physicians were not abundant, and those who were trained were not easily mobile, most English people took to their neighbours to cure them of ailments. The authors further contend that many lay and learned English people trusted and preferred the medical aid of untrained wise women, folk healers, and cunning folk to look after their bodily health. This acceptance of folk healing contributed in part to what the authors call an “epistemological confusion around witchcraft.” On the one hand, English communities had long accepted, preferred, or uneasily tolerated the folk spiritual and healing practices by those in their own communities for centuries prior to the height of

55 David and Andrew Pickering, 16.
56 Ibid, 17.
their witch-hunting in 1640. On the other hand, these same practices could be tried as sorcery under any one of the various witchcraft acts from 1542 until 1735, provided there was an accuser. This creates uncertain distinctions in what constituted harmful witchcraft, and what was a communal service.

In the Caribbean scholarship, Diana Paton records a similar ‘epistemological confusion’ around Obeah. Paton emphasizes the 1760 Obeah Act in Jamaica as an indicator of the difficulties in defining Obeah and criminalizing it. After Tacky’s War, Jamaican legislators became aware of the dangers Obeah posed to the colony and immediately sought to prohibit it. Paton argues that the 1760 Obeah Act “drew on the concept of witchcraft in English law and Christian religion,” by prohibiting the practice of “Obeah or Witchcraft” specifically. The confusion, however, is noted in the instance that Obeah is “pretended.” Therefore, while Obeah was regarded as politically dangerous and criminalized, legislators and to some extent, their constituents, claimed not to be convinced that enslaved Africans could utilize supernatural power in the practice of Obeah. Paton states that the “makers of the Jamaican anti-Obeah legislation were far more concerned with suppressing Obeah itself – even while they purported not to believe in its power.”

Diana Paton’s work then shows that Obeah raised similar anxieties in colonial authorities over how to categorize and respond to practitoning, as did witchcraft in England and their acceptance of folk healing.

57 Ibid, 16-17; see also Richard Godbeer’s similar argument in, The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England, 26.
58 Pickering, 10-11, 14.
60 Ibid, 41.
61 Ibid.
English literary professors, Kelly Wisecup and Toni Wall Jaudon’s article “On Knowing and Not Knowing About Obeah” similarly interrogates the question of how white colonists understood Obeah during slavery. Specifically, Wisecup and Jaudon describe Obeah as a “medical and religious complex” that creates an “epistemological conundrum” for colonists of the Atlantic World. The authors maintain that the actual practicing of Obeah forced European colonists to make sense of the practice through European epistemologies. In the eighteenth-century, however, preternatural phenomena were being explained through science and philosophical methodologies. Wisecup and Jaudon argue that colonists followed these precedents to try to discover the natural causes behind Obeah’s effects. At times, they were successful in locating natural causes of phenomena and illness; however, more often, Obeah practitioners’ materials left them with no natural explanation. This created difficulty for colonists seeking to represent Obeah as entirely pretended. Instead, this confusion makes colonists recognize that Obeah was “a powerful, valuable phenomena constituted out of mixtures of natural and preternatural powers.” Thus, the scholarship pertaining to both European and witchcraft reveals that they similarly created a conundrum around their lore and practicing methods. Witchcraft and Obeah in both primary and second sources differ in their operational contexts. While both practices created epistemological confusions within their respective localities, colonist’s responses to Obeah are further complicated by the influence of race and the context of slavery.

62 Wisecup and Jaudon, 129.
63 Ibid, 131.
64 Ibid, 131-132.
65 Ibid, 134.
Europeans had a long history of viewing magical practices as potentially harmful, but also as a sign of ignorant superstition and marginality – both targeted their religious opponents, as Protestants did with Catholics, but even moreso within their co-religionists. Magical practitioners, demonic or otherwise, has always existed on the margins of acceptable society. This is especially true for African religions and spirituality. The history of European interactions with Africans shows that whites have long used pejorative connotations to describe and make sense of African religions. Travellers, slave traders, and missionaries frequently invalidated African religions and instead viewed Blacks as irreligious, and their belief systems as evidence of their primitivism, practicing ‘unstructured’ superstitions and “animalistic” practices. Since religion is typically seen as reflective of culture and civility, the apparent heathenism of Africans was also used to justify slavery, just as the alleged paganism of indigenous people was used to justify their subjugation.66 So when European’s pre-formed understandings of Africans and Afro-religions were confronted with Obeah practitioners, we can see that white colonials often times used their racist and ethnocentric perceptions to inform their perceptions of Obeah practices. Thus, Obeah was not inherently unique, as academic scholarship has maintained, but the way in which white colonists responded to Obeah in the context of slavery is cause for further investigation.

This thesis then situates Obeah suppression within these many conversations, epistemologies, and contexts. When studying the colonial suppression of Obeah, it is absolutely necessary to consider the various ways in which Europeans considered Africans, witchcraft, and the supernatural, and how these all intersected within the context of violent enslavement.\textsuperscript{67} Instead, this thesis maintains that Obeah was suppressed from 1650 to 1834 as a result of these many moving parts, and further exacerbated by the Caribbean plantation system which provided contextual sociopolitical conflicts that agitated white anxieties over Obeah.\textsuperscript{68} Obeah can first be seen to come into conflict with English colonial debates towards racial boundaries as described within Protestantism, and the decline of European witchcraft belief in the Atlantic.

\textsuperscript{67} Bilby and Handler, 156.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
Chapter 1: Religion and Belief 1650-1740

In the mid-seventeenth century, the English were increasing their involvement in the African slave trade, and reeling from the aftermath of two violent domestic conflicts: the English Civil War and the height of English witch-hunting. It is within this backdrop of colonial expansion and debate that this chapter situates the suppression of Obeah from 1650 to 1740. This chapter interrogates the confrontation of Protestant Christianity, race, and supernatural beliefs in the Anglo-Atlantic World. More specifically, this chapter argues that Obeah belief was destabilized and infantilized as it drew on white colonists’ concerns over the racial boundaries of Protestantism, and confronted English beliefs in magical practitioners in the age of skepticism. Scholars have not focused their attention on Obeah in this early period, due in part to the lack of sources directly referencing the term "Obeah." Obeah is also difficult to define conclusively, mainly because white colonial authorities deemed many enslaved expressions of spirituality or medical practitioners as Obeah due to their lack of understanding of African culture. While not formally considered a religion, the practice of Obeah rests heavily on African-derived religious belief systems and thus, before Obeah entered the common colonial lexicon in the early eighteenth century, writers either describe the practices loosely or refer to them as ‘superstitions’ or simply, ‘beliefs’. This chapter contributes to the long history of Obeah suppression by

69 The term 'Obeah' takes many forms in the historical record and has seemed to of been employed from the beginning of the eighteenth century, and likely earlier. As Obeah derived from many ethnolinguistic and socio-religious traditions, it is comprised of an array of broadly related features. These African spiritual and religious practices get enveloped into the term 'Obeah' more common in the eighteenth century. For more on the origins of the word ‘Obeah’, see Jerome Handler, and Kenneth M Bilby. “Notes and Documents - On the Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah’ in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean,” Slavery & Abolition 22, no. 2 (2001): 87–100.
highlighting how racism, Christianity, and European witchcraft beliefs were embedded in English responses to African spirituality and remained a prominent feature of white discourses on Obeah in the two centuries following.

The majority of the British responses to Obeah within the historical record describe it as illegitimate and pretended. This rhetoric begins in the seventeenth century in regard to African religions and spirituality. At times, English colonists and travelers directly compared these practices to European understandings of witchcraft. Thus, European supernatural skepticism arising in the seventeenth and eighteenth century is inter-related in this discourse. For instance, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan (1651)* was popularized for his questioning of the legitimacy and morality of state authority, and not renowned for his contributions to witchcraft skepticism. However, his work criticized witchcraft in a way that would later become a common challenge to Obeah from 1650 to 1740. He stated, “as for Witches, I think not that their witchcraft is any reall Power; but yet that they are justly punished, for the false believe they have, that they can do such mischief, joined with their purpose to do it if they can; their trade being nearer to a new religion than to a Craft or Science.” Hobbes criticized witchcraft practices in Europe for claiming false power, yet asserts that witches are deserving of punishment to suppress the dangers arising from witchcraft beliefs. Hobbes’ critique follows a long-held tradition which formally began with the *Canon Episcopi’s* position on witchcraft in the eleventh century until the

fifteenth century. The text of the *Canon Episcopi* did not condemn witchcraft as heretical, but like Hobbes, condemned the belief in witchcraft.\(^2\) Hobbes' skepticism in the seventeenth century is integral to understanding the relationship between English witchcraft and the suppression of Obeah and creolized African religions in the British Caribbean.

European skepticism towards witchcraft is not the sole culprit in the suppression of Obeah in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Instead, these ideologies work in conjunction with notions of Protestant supremacy and racist ideas of acceptable belief systems to destabilize the religious foundations of Obeah. Thus, from 1650 to 1740 and in the two centuries following, anti-Obeah rhetoric from colonists asserted that African-derived spirituality is aberrant and pretended. Furthermore, religious and plantocratic officials sought to understand how the enslaved should be situated within the boundaries of Protestantism and slavery, while simultaneously having to confront African-derived spiritual traditions on plantations. Consequently, these confrontations allowed colonists to construct enslaved Africans as the irreligious ‘others.’

**Protestantism and Slavery in the English Atlantic**

After the colonization of Barbados in 1627, the Anglican Church in Barbados quickly became central to the maintenance of power for white colonists. The Anglican Church in Barbados was exclusive and restricted, accessible to white slaveholders and government officials. These churches were not only the domain for religious devotion but

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the converging point for socio-political interactions. Parishioners held island elections in churches, posted bulletins, and practiced Protestant traditions. For the Planter elite, Protestantism was inseparable from their identity as free Englishmen, and as a result, sought to keep the church exclusive, separating masters from the enslaved. Historian Katherine Gerbner explains this as the propagation of "Protestant supremacy" where Protestant slave owners linked Christianity to mastery, whiteness, and freedom. The colonial elite in Barbados viewed Protestantism as a religion for free people and English citizens, and this connection was so pronounced in the 1660s that most slaveholders dismissed the idea that Africans were eligible for conversion.

The admission of slaves into Christianity was a contentious topic that stretched back into the medieval era. For Catholic colonists from Spain and Portugal proselytizing the new religious "others" was an attempt to justify enslavement in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Over a century later, Protestant colonists had difficulty conclusively defining the relationship between slavery and Protestantism; perhaps exacerbated by the Church of England neglecting to appoint bishops for their Atlantic colonies. Thus, the white colonial understanding of Protestantism being exclusive to white mastery could continue relatively unchecked by religious officials until the 1660s. Colonists then articulated the stereotype that Africans were not Christian and thus barbarous and prone to violence. This rhetoric of connecting whiteness to Christianity and African-ness to

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73 Gerbner, 1-2.
74 Ibid, 2, 30.
barbarity is evident in the contemporary political writer, Edmund Bohun's 1693 letter. Bohun told of “the late barbarous and bloody” insurrection attempt by slaves. He stated, “For the Negro's in this Island had made a Plot to have distroy'd all the Christians therein; and it was to have been done that very day that we came hither.”

Bohun's work is one among many of the seventeenth century to use the term “Christian” to denote “white.” This racial boundary around Protestantism was important for the plantocracy in Barbados, as it reaffirmed their superiority of their enslaved labourers. However, this boundary began to erode as debates increased between Protestant missionaries and theologians on the one side, and planters and other colonists on the other over enslaved baptism. These debates situated Africans in a contentious middle ground where their religious beliefs and Obeah spiritual practices was challenged both by the plantocracy, and government and religious officials.

English laws were unclear about the effectiveness of Protestant baptism on slave status, which made the plantocracy fear that the evangelization of African slaves would justify manumission. Further, the planter elite had established the Anglican Church as exclusive to white colonists, and through the debates of the 1660s, actively sought to ensure enslaved Africans remained the ‘irreligious others’. English traveller Richard Ligon

76 Edmund Bohun, “A Brief, but Most True Relation of the Late Barbarous and Bloody Plot of the Negro’s [Sic] in the Island of Barbado’s [Sic] on Friday the 21. of October 1692,” 1693.
77 The 1661 Act for the better ordering of Negroes also references enslaved Africans as “Heathenish” and “brutish” while denoting whites as “Christians.” An Act for the Better Ordering of Negroes,” Barbados 1661 (Public Record Office, Kew, United Kingdom, CO 30/2/16–26); Richard Ligon’s History of Barbadoes similarly juxtaposes “Negroes” with “Christians” consistently.
78 Gerbner, 14.
explains his interaction with this conflict during his 1657 visit to Barbados in which he explains,

I promised to do my best endeavour; and when I came home, spoke to the Master of the Plantation, and told him, that poor Sambo desired much to be a Christian. But his answer was, That the people of that Island were governed by the Lawes of England, and by those Lawes, we could not make a Christian a Slave. I told him, my request was far different from that, for I desired him to make a Slave a Christian. His answer was, That it was true, there was a great difference in that: But, being once a Christian, he could no more account him a Slave, and so lose the hold they had of them as Slaves, by making them Christians; and by that means should open such a gap, as all the Planters in the Island would curse him. So I was struck mute, and poor Sambo kept out of the Church; as ingenious, as honest, and as good a natured poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green. 79

Baptism debates continued to gain hold in the 1660s in Barbados where anti-conversion sentiment in planters reached a high, and Colonial authorities urged ministers and the plantocracy in 1661 to consider how to invite indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans into the Christian faith. Colonial authorities pushed the matter in dual hopes of improving the alleged debaucherous nature of planters and the general improvement and security of the plantations. 80 In 1663 two acts were presented to the Barbadian Assembly which declared that the laws of England were in place in regards to matters of public welfare and for the "recommending the christening of Negro children and instruction of all adult negroes." 81 Despite this recommendation, planters continued to believe that enslaved baptism would liberate blacks from enslavement. In 1681, the Barbadian Assembly, comprised of majority white, wealthy planters, was instructed by Governor Richard

79 Ligon, 79.
81 Ibid, 587.
Dutton, to draft and pass a law to baptize the enslaved peoples of Barbados. They declined the law claiming,

That the conversion of their slaves to Christianity would not only destroy their property but endanger the island, inasmuch as converted negroes grow more perverse and intractable than others, and hence of less value for labour or sale. The disproportion of blacks to whites being great, the whites have no greater security than the diversity of the negroes’ languages, which would be destroyed by conversion, in that it would be necessary to teach them all English.  

White planters argued that slaves would be more successful at rebellion if made Christian. The notion that Africans were naturally prone to rebelliousness was reflected in the 1661 Barbados slave code which explicitly identified Africans as "an Heathenishe, Brutish and uncertaine, dangerous kind of People." Anti-Conversion sentiments throughout the 1660s, therefore, illuminate not just the desire not to disrupt the foundations of slavery, but also the English plantocracy's desires to define and perpetuate difference.

Pro-conversion advocates also expressed a variety of reasons to introduce enslaved peoples to Protestantism. One of the most controversial pro-baptism advocates was Anglican Bishop Morgan Godwyn who wrote a scathing report on the negligence of Colonial planters in Christianising slaves. His work The Indian and Negro's Advocate (1685) chiefly asserted that every man has an equal right to religion and accuses Barbadian

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84 Ibid, 16.
planters of being irreligious themselves, he further claimed that those unwilling to baptize their slaves do not value religion, only profit.\textsuperscript{85} He stated,

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[\ldots] \text{I have here attempted to break through this Opposition; and as not knowing how to justify my silence, which perchance might be more safe; without any regard to those Gentlemens displeasure, which I must expect even to the utmost degree; I do here tender to the Public this Plea both for the Christianizing of our Negro's and other Heathen in those Plantations, and for settling (or rather reviving) of Religion amongst our own People there.}\textsuperscript{86}
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While the British North American colony of Virginia had taken legislative action to begin quelling this debate in 1667, it was not until 1696 that a similar law became enacted in the British Caribbean.\textsuperscript{87} The Jamaican assembly passed \textit{An Act For The Better Order and Government of Slaves} (1696) which also established that “no Slave shall be free by Becoming a Christian.”\textsuperscript{88} Furthermore, the proceeding sections then enforced the Christianisation of slaves, and stated,

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\text{That all masters and mistresses, Owners, or, in their Absence, Overseers of Slaves, shall, as much as in them lies, endeavour the Instruction of their Slaves in the principles of the Christian Religion, whereby to facilitate the Conversion; and shall do their utmost Endeavour to fit them for Baptism; and, as soon as conveniently they can, shall cause to be baptized all such as they can make sensible of a Deity, and the Christian Faith.}\textsuperscript{89}
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\textsuperscript{85} Morgan Godwyn, \textit{The Negro’s & Indians Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church, or, A Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro’s and Indians in Our Plantations : Shewing, That as the Compliance Therewith Can Prejudice No Man’s Just Interest : So the Wilful Neglecting and Opposing of It, Is No Less than a Manifest Apostacy from the Christian Faith : To Which Is Added, a Brief Account of Religion in Virginia} (London: Printed for the author, by J.D., 1680), 1.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} The Grand Assembly of Virginia passed an Act ensuring that by law “Children that are slaves not made free by being Baptized.” Found in “America and West Indies: September 1667.” Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 5, 1661-1668, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1880), 1585.
\textsuperscript{89} Gerbner, 57.
Despite this Act, few slaveholders allowed their slaves to become baptized as Christians. Between the first Christian baptism of an enslaved African in 1650 and the end of this period in 1730s, it is estimated that less than 90 baptisms were performed on enslaved Africans in Barbados. Of these baptisms, Gerbner hypothesizes that most would have been slaves with increased social standing, who interacted frequently with whites, and held important jobs like drivers, personal servants, or head boilermakers.90 The decision to allow an enslaved person into Protestantism was often based on personal relationships that recognized the slave’s humanity and civility, and thus made them better suited for Christianity.

These pro- and anti-conversion debates and legislative efforts occurred within the context of broader instability and change for the Protestant Atlantic World. Throughout the seventeenth-century, Protestant colonies lacked missionary orders from a national church, and as a result, the conversion of non-Europeans varied based on individual efforts.91 In Barbados specifically, the planter class held significant authority over the church during the early years of English settlement, which allowed the exclusive European vision of Christianity to propagate more widely.92 Despite these efforts, some enslaved Africans became baptized into Christianity after a restructuring of Protestantism. This restructuring indicated that Baptism would not equate freedom, and the argument that perhaps Christian conversion would control enslaved behaviour and eradicate religious and spiritual

90 Ibid, 76.
91 Ibid, 29.
92 Ibid, 30.
difference gained traction. To adjust to non-Europeans taking part in Protestant rituals, colonial slave codes that were formerly juxtaposing white free people as "Christians" and slaves as "negros" were amended. Colonial legislation then began distinguishing freedom and slavery based on race-based terms, like "negro" and "white." Amidst these debates over enslavement and Christianity, in 1662, Jamaican Governor Lord Windsor made a move towards the religious tolerance of Catholics and Quakers in stating, "All persons professing the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, though differing in religious worship, shall enjoy all the liberties and privileges of other inhabitants, provided they observe the civil laws and customs." This, however, did not include the African religiosity of enslaved peoples, because colonial officials did not view it as a viable religious expression. Negating the reality of African religions and spirituality was common practice by travellers, writers, and planters in the British Caribbean at the time. At the centre of these observed practices, was foundational beliefs tied to Obeah. It is in this specific historical context that the religious differences of enslaved Africans became analyzed, debated, and often, trivialized.

**African Religions and Protestant Society**

Throughout the seventeenth century Christian slaveholders used religion to assert dominance and police enslaved populations as an expression of Protestant supremacy; this sought to capitalize on the black exclusion from the Protestant social structure and reaffirmed slaves as the religious others or more accurately the “irreligious” others. At

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93 Ibid, 32, 89. 
95 Gerbner, 30.
this time, English travellers in the Caribbean documented their observations of enslaved Africans with specific attention to their aberrant spiritual practices and their religious expressions. The English lack of comprehension of enslaved traditional practices and languages contributed to the construction of enslaved spirituality as disorganized, and indicated an inherent heathenish nature of the enslaved people.

For example, in Richard Ligon's published account of his visit to Barbados in 1657, he described everything from flora and fauna to African belief systems, cultural practices, and religion. Of particular interest, Ligon described enslaved religiosity stating, "Religion they know none; Yet most of them acknowledge a God, as appears by their motions and gestures: For if one of them do another wrong, and he cannot revenge himselfe, he looks up to Heaven for vengeance, and holds up both hands, as if the power must come from thence, that must do him right." Ligon's rejection of a formal religion amongst the enslaved continued into a discussion of their unstructured beliefs stating,

What their other opinions are in matter of Religion, I know not; but certainly, they are not altogether of the sect of the Sadducees: For, they believe a Resurrection, and that they shall go into their own Country again, and have their youth renewed. And lodging this opinion in their hearts, they make it an ordinary practice, upon any great fright, or threatening of their Masters, to hang themselves.

To Ligon, the enslaved belief in the resurrection was connected in some way to a form of religious belief and expression by its grouping in with Ligon’s concern over their religious validity and with the Sadducees, a sect of the Jewish faith in the 2nd century BCE who denied the resurrection of the body. As a whole, despite his noted evidence to support a

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96 Ligon, 79-80.
97 Ibid, 75.
98 Ligon, 80.
formal African-derived religious structure, Richard Ligon offered the practice no legitimacy and disconnects the slaves’ spiritual beliefs of resurrection from religion. Ligon was not alone in these remarks, as Englishman George Warren wrote while in Surinam in 1667,

They are naturally treacherous and bloody, and practice no Religion there, though many of them are Circumsis'd: But they believe the Ancient Pythagorean Errour of the Soul's Transmigration out of one body into another, that when they dye, they shall return into their own Countries and be Regenerated, so live in the World by a Constant Revolution.99

Once again, the enslaved Africans that Warren described believed in the transmigration of the soul; however, Warren, like Ligon still regarded them as irreligious and dangerous. Many travellers and colonists had little understanding, consideration, or ability to comprehend enslaved spiritual practices, exacerbated by linguistic barriers. Anglo-Barbadian writer Charles Leslie, however, appeared to have a better understanding of West African religious epistemologies. Leslie wrote that Africans in Jamaica are generally polytheistic, believing in a good God called, ‘Naskew’ and a bad God called ‘Timnew.’ Leslie similarly discussed African religious beliefs stating, “their notions are extremely dark they have no idea of heaven, further than the pleasures of returning to their native country, whither they believed every negro goes after death: this thought is so agreeable, that it chears the poor creatures.”100 Despite Leslie acknowledging an African religious system, he claimed it was disorganized. Leslie wrote, “Their notion of religion are very

inconsistent and very according to the different countries they come from: But they have a kind of occasional conformity, and join without distinction in their solemn sacrifices and Gambols.” The traditional rites and ‘gambols’ Leslie referred to were a point of interest for white observers of Obeah practices.

When Hans Sloane travelled to Jamaica twenty years later in 1687 as a personal physician, he wrote *A Voyage to Jamaica* which detailed his observations of health practices and medical case histories, natural science, and botany. Sloane, like, Ligon and Warren, revealed his ambiguous stance towards many aspects of enslaved African’s lives from medical knowledge and herbalism to religious practices. At times regarding the enslaved as uncivilized and primitive, he could also express fleeting praise for their botanical knowledge. Hans Sloane's documented understanding is similar to that of most white European observers: complex and Eurocentric. To this point Sloane remarked that "The Indians and negros have no manner of religion, by what I could observe of them. 'Tis true they have several ceremonies, as dances, playing, &c but these are so far from being acts of adoration of a God, they are for the most part mixt with a great deal of bawdry and lewdness." These ceremonies and dances that Hans Sloane referred to typically took

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102 Ibid, 90; also see Julie Chun Kim’s chapter in this collection which chiefly argues that despite Hans Sloane never mentioning Obeah or Obeah practitioners, that his discussions of “negro doctors” and their “pretended” medicine is related to Obeah practice. It is shown that as a result of his correspondence with Henry Barham in 1717 that he knew of Obeah practices occurring in the Caribbean. Sloane’s neglect to acknowledge these practitioners in *A Voyage To Jamaica* was an act to dismiss their expertise,101.
103 Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica : With the Natural History ... of the Last of Those Islands ; to Which Is Prefix’d an Introduction, Wherein Is an Account of the Inhabitants, Air, Waters, Diseases, Trade, &c. ... Illustrated with the Figures of the Things Describ’d ... By Hans Sloane ... In Two Volumes. ...*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (London: Printed by B.M. for the author, 1707), 56.
place on days of rest, Sundays and holidays, when slave owners and overseers generally allowed their enslaved to practice their own customs and religious rites in private amongst their community. Despite Sloane, and many other white observers, not considering these gatherings as religiously symbolic or significant, to the enslaved they have a strong tie to African religiosity and tradition. This however, became more alarming to white colonists at the end of the seventeenth century, and African spiritual practices began to signify a form of dangerous spirituality that required legislative attention. In Jamaica in 1696 An Act For The Better Order and Government of Slaves put a stop to these gatherings with the section stating,

And for the Prevention of the meeting of slaves in great numbers on Sundays and Holidays, whereby they have taken the Liberty to contrive and bring to pass many of their bloody and inhuman transactions; be it further enacted by the Authority aforesaid, that no Masters or mistresses, or Overseers, shall suffer any Drumming or Meeting of any slaves, not belonging to their own Plantation to rendezvous, feast, beat Drum, or cause any other Disturbance, but forthwith endeavor to disperse them, by him, of herself, overseer, or servants; or not being capacitated to do the same, that he presently give Notice to the next;104

Enacting legislation to disperse these gatherings and spiritual practices was a direct suppressing agent against the enslaved community. For enslaved Africans these ritual expressions allowed them to establish community and belonging.105 Charles Leslie recorded one of these community ceremonies in 1740. This traditional funerary rite was sacred to the enslaved, who were confronted with death as a frequent feature of Caribbean slavery.106 Leslie wrote,

[...] When they come to the grave, which is generally made in some Savannah or Plain, they lay down the coffin, or whatever the body happens to be wrapt in; and

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105 Shaw, 102.
106 Brown, 63.
if he be one whose circumstances could allow it. Or if he be generally beloved, the negroes sacrifice a hog, in honour of him, which they contribute to the expenses of, among themselves. The manner of the sacrifice is this; the nearest relation kills it, the innails are buried, the four quarters are divided, and a kind of soup is made, which is brought in a calabash or gourd, and, after waving it three times, it is set down; then the body is put in the ground; all the while they are covering it with earth, the attendants scream out in a terrible manner, which is not the effect of grief, but of joy; they beat on their wooden drums, and the women with their rattles make a hideous noise; after the grave is filled up, they place the soup which they had prepared at the head, and a bottle of rum at the feet. 107

These types of rituals additionally created a space within their religious community for spiritual healers, like Obeahmen and women to serve their community by facilitating medical attention, reconnecting with ancestral spirits, at times, using the socially negative qualities of Obeah to exact inter-community justice through spells, potion, and various invocations. 108 Barbadian authorities focused on enslaved rituals and specifically the practice of drumming, framing it in the context of security for planters. They claimed that drums “may call together, or give sign or notice to one another, of their wicked designs and purposes.” 109 The legislative restriction on drumming during enslaved rituals was also implicitly a restriction of African spiritual practice. Historian Diana Paton states that, since African societies used drums in religious rituals and to invoke spirits, that planter security suppressed Obeah rituals. 110 Thus, the rejection of African religiosity as illegitimate, coupled with emerging legislation against expressions of spiritual rituals is integral to the discussions of Christianity, conversion, and Obeah-related practices in the English Atlantic

107 Leslie, 309.
108 Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, Creole Religions of the Caribbean, 12, 185.
110 Ibid, 250-1.
world. Legislation against enslaved assemblies was not the only suppressive action taken against African spirituality in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. White colonists, planters, and travellers articulated particular rhetoric that weaponized Christianity against Obeah practices and beliefs that were deemed "superstitious" by observers. Specifically, writers asserted that African spiritual practices could be eradicated through Christianization.

French Protestant pastor Charles de Rochefort wrote on the history and natural geography of British colonies in 1666. In addition to echoing the same sentiments as the authors as mentioned earlier - resolving that it was inconclusive whether African slaves observed religion – de Rochefort asserted that African-derived superstitions could be forgotten in favour of Christianity.111 On this topic, he concluded that, "They are naturally susceptible of all impressions, and the first that are deriv'd into them among the Christians, after they have renounc'd their Superstitions and Idolatry, they pertinaciously adhere unto, wherein they differ much from the Indians of America, who are as unconstant as Cameleons."112

The discussion referring to enslaved Africans as being devoid of organized religion articulated a trend in English attitudes towards non-Christian religiosity, one that challenged the foundation on which Obeah practice rests. In the writings from Ligon, Warren, and Sloane, the authors acknowledged enslaved spiritual practices as traditional

111 Charles de Rochefort, The History of Barbados, St Christophers, Mevis, St Vincents, Antego, Martinico, Monserrat, and the Rest of the Caribby-Islands, in All XXVIII: In Two Books, the First Containing the Natural, the Second, the Moral History of Those Islands: Illustrated with Several Pieces of Sculpture, Representing the Most Considerable Rarities Therein Described, trans. John Davies (London: Printed for John Starkey and Thomas Dring junr, 1666), 201.
112 Ibid, 201.
ceremonies, yet they disconnected this religious performance from their conceptions of true religion, effectively delegitimizing African-derived spirituality. The suppression and delegitimization of Obeah-related practices is useful for understanding the complicated way in which white colonists and travellers situated Obeah and other forms of African spirituality alongside their European knowledge of witchcraft. Since white writers did not view African religions and Obeah practices as exemplars of organized religiosity, it is unsurprising that Obeah practices did not reignite Christian concerns over European witchcraft and diabolism. On the surface, African’s spiritual practitionering and ritual ceremonies held similar elements to European conceptions of the witches Sabbath, however, these connections were not made by white colonists, at least not within the historical record. Yet, writers did not place Obeah practices into the same epistemological sphere as European witchcraft beliefs; instead, they viewed them under the scrutiny of intellectual skepticism. The challenging and destabilizing of enslaved spirituality and legitimacy is a by-product of the English European complex and shifting attitudes towards Witchcraft and sorcery in the Protestant Atlantic world.

Dangerous Spirituality, and Preternatural Belief in the British Atlantic World

In the early eighteenth century, the ceremonies and practices of enslaved Africans (funerary rites and ritual drumming), which were more theatrical than white Protestant rituals, posed an uncertain threat to masters. This threat and discomfort was not entirely new to whites in the British Atlantic World, especially from 1650 until 1735 when witchcraft and sorcery were heavily debated across England and the English colonies. It appears that Obeah and European sorcery began to represent a dangerous form of
spirituality and ‘superstition’ at similar times in the early eighteenth century when wider discussions emerged across the Atlantic about which belief systems were tolerable and which were superstitions and thus required suppression. In the Caribbean specifically, as Africans and their descendants creolized their belief systems, some conforming outwardly to Christian conversion, traditional African-derived practices still held spiritual authority over enslaved people's lives. From elaborate funerary rites, to divination as a means to mediate intercommunity conflict, supernatural power was woven into the fabric of everyday life.113 From the written accounts of whites in Jamaica and Barbados in the eighteenth century, the expression of African spirituality on plantations was an uncomfortable feature to some white observers, primarily due to English travellers stigmatizing these practices for having ‘no religious foundations’. As a religious outsider, Obeah practice, which at this time became a catch-all term for all African-derived spiritual practices, was interpreted as irrational, theatrical, and potentially dangerous. Within the historical record, all three interpretations are evident at the beginning of the eighteenth century, closely following the decline of witchcraft belief in England.

To that point, the history of English witch-hunting holds critical keys to unlocking British Caribbean responses to African magical practices. In England, witch-hunting occurred later into the early modern period (only peaking in the 1640’s) than it did within western European countries, for instance German witch-hunting peaked between 1580-1640 and France following a similar timeline, eventually decriminalizing witchcraft in

113 Brown, 74-76.
However, across Europe one essential component of witchcraft beliefs was its direct link to Christian theology. Witches worked as an integral part of a demonic hierarchy, with the Devil at the top and engaged in an eternal struggle of good versus evil with God. The witch held a special relationship with the Devil and either carried out or assisted with his malevolent deeds. Complicating this understanding was the existence of sorcerers in the fifteenth century who used magic but unlike witches, did not often rely on the assistance of evil spirits or the Devil. However, throughout the early modern period, the distinction between witches and sorcerers was eroded, and the term was often used interchangeably when believers were confronted with any forms of magical practicing or preternatural belief systems. This is most evident in European interactions with Indigenous communities in early North America. In England, the distinctions between witchcraft and sorcery were never clear in the legislation. The first statute to deal with the socio-religious problem of witchcraft occurred in 1542 under Henry VIII and made no explicit connections to diabolism as an inherent characteristic of witchcraft, but encompasses acts of sorcery and heretical acts against Christ, exclaiming,

That if any person or persons, after the first day of May next coming, use, devise, practise or exercise, or cause to be used, devised, practised or exercised, any invocations or conjurations of spirits, witchcrafts, enchantments, or sorceries, to the intent to get or find money to treasure, or to waste, consume or destroy any person in his body, members, or goods, or to provoke any person to unlawful love, or for any other unlawful intent or purpose, or by occasion or colour of such things or any

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114 Levack, 189-190.
116 Games, 9; also see Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
of them, or for despite of Christ, or for lucre of money, dig up or pull down any
cross or crosses, or by such invocations or conjurations of spirits, witchcrafts,
enchantments, or sorcery, or any of them, take upon them to tell or declare where
goods stolen or lost shall become, That then all and every such offence and
offences, from the said first day of May next coming, shall be deemed and accepted
and adjudged felony.117

The English Parliament repealed the Act in 1547, and no statute prohibiting witchcraft or
sorcery was in place until Elizabeth I enacted An Act Against Conjurations Enchantments
and Witchcrafts which echoed Henry VIII's law.118 In 1604, James I's An Act against
conjuration witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits introduced the diabolic
dimension of witchcraft lore to England. His act maintained the proscription of sorcery-
related practices but in stating that these practitioners "Shall use practise or exercise any
invocation with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil wicked spirit for any intent or
purpose [...]" this statute implied that any use of witchcraft, sorceries, or charms were
inherently diabolic.119 Acts of sorcery, including divination, healing potions, counter-
magic, or even non-Christian rituals were then considered diabolic, and thus an offence to
God and anti-Christian.120 Witchcraft then was unacceptable in Christian society, and an

117 Barbara Rosen, Witchcraft in England, 1558-1618 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 199),
53-54.
118 Ibid, 53-56.
119 Ibid, 57-58; Sharpe 90-95.
120 See: William Perkins, A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft : So Farre Forth as It Is Revealed in
the Scriptures, and Manifest by True Experience. Framed and Delivered by M. William Perkins, in His
Ordinarie Course of Preaching, and Now Published by Tho. Pickering Batchelor of Divinitie, and
Minister of Finchingfield in Essex. Whereunto Is Adioyned a Twofold Table ; One of the Order and Heads
of the Treatise ; Another of the Texts of Scripture Explaned, or Vindicated from the Corrupt Interpretation
of the Aduersarie. (Cambridge: Printed by Cantrel Legge, printer to the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, 1610).
Perkins was an Anglican clergyman whose work on demonology affirms that practicing witchcraft was a
direct offense to God. His work was largely debated amongst skeptics but also his ideas were widely
disseminated.
intolerable belief as Witch-hunting reached its height in the 1640s during the English Civil War and notably in the 1645 Essex witch trials where the demonic stereotype was a focal point of confessions.\textsuperscript{121}

Some exceptions did however exist, in particular in Puritan New England where some folk magic existed alongside Christianity during this period of heightened fear of diabolical activity. In English North American colonies, magical beliefs were not inherently religious, and despite Puritan ministers condemning the practices as diabolical, they had an uneasy coexistence towards the end of the seventeenth century. Ministers in New England noted for example that sorcery was not only practiced by those who rejected Puritanism, but also by members of their church.\textsuperscript{122} Since religious instruction in Protestant colonies during this time was vague and unstructured, historian Richard Godbeer concludes that this caused colonists to believe folk magic could coexist with their formal religious beliefs. Exacerbated by the conclusion that belief in preternatural magic was informal and did not ascribe to a consistent doctrinal system, colonists further believed that folk magic lacked an organized institutional structure and therefore could be practiced without a sense of wrongdoing in the eyes of Christianity.\textsuperscript{123}

This is similar in a sense to Protestant authorities remarking on African religiosity and Obeah practice on plantations; as the religious foundations were dismantled, the practice itself lacked a coherent doctrinal system and as a result, was easily dismissed as

\textsuperscript{121} H.F. True and Exact Relations of Informations, Examinations, and Confessions of late Witches, 4-20.
\textsuperscript{122} Godbeer, 5.
\textsuperscript{123} Godbeer, 6.
pretended and ignorant. The difference in reaction is evident, as Puritan ministers condemned the practices of sorcery formally, whereas English authorities in the Caribbean infantilized the practice; both, however, were suppressive tactics. However, unlike Puritan folk practitoning, colonial authorities did not ignore Obeah because the practice began to represent a physical danger to Caribbean colonies and their inhabitants. By the mid-eighteenth-century authorities in Barbados and Jamaica were aware of the corporeal dangers Obeah posed. This is because the practitioners were not white Puritan colonists. Obeah practitioners were enslaved Africans, and therefore posed a threat to plantation slavery. Although the early eighteenth century saw the height of the enlightenment and supernatural skepticism targeting witchcraft belief, it also lay the foundation for the intellectual and legislative suppression of Obeah.

By the end of the seventeenth century, English political authorities no longer actively promoted witch-hunting.124 While belief in traditional Devil-worshipping witchcraft began to dissipate and become associated with rural belief systems, folk magic such as divination continued as a part of rural and urban life.125 Despite the decline in formal witch-hunting, the cultural familiarity with humans invoking preternatural powers through natural or demonic means was passed through to white travellers in the British Caribbean. This can be seen in English Sailor, Thomas Walduck's 1712 letters when he communicated to his British audience. He referenced Obeah through a European understanding of witchcraft lore. While stationed in Barbados, he detailed the prevalence

124 Elmer, 10, 285.
of magic on the island stating, that "[…] white men overseers of plantations and Masters have been afforsed to leve this island by being bewitched by the Negros, but whether through fear of superstition I shall not resolve." Walduck continued to affirm that this bewitchment comes at the hands of specifically African-born slaves. This magical practice that Walduck described, he called “Obia,” and with this letter, Walduck penned one of the first recorded documents to mention Obeah by name. Walduck also connected Obeah to European witchcraft by employing Eurocentric terms for witchcraft, writing, “that the Negros here use Naturall (or Diabolical) Magick no planter in Barbados doubts, but how they doe it none of us knows.” He continued to describe the practice stating, 

[…] but that one Negro can torment another is beyond doubt, by sending and unaccountable pains in different parts of their Body, lameness, madness, loss of speech, lose the use of all their limbs without any paine and that one (Obia) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our Country hath done in England. I have knowne upon Negros complaining that they are bewitched, an Obia Negro hath taken out of their eyes bones, shells out of their Thighs, pieces of Iron out of their bellys, and such odd things out of other parts that I have admired at it but by what legerdemain I could never discover having been careful to search them before.

Walduck's statements here are unique in two ways. First, his observations of enslaved spirituality being similar in ways to European magic, as seen in his uncertainty as to

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127 Ibid, 148-149.
128 Many Caribbean historians regard Thomas Walduck's letter as the first recorded document to reference the enslaved practice of Obeah in the British Caribbean. However, Africanist John K. Thornton indicates in War, The State, and Religious Norms in "Coromantee" Thought: The Ideology of an African American Nation that the earliest attestation of the word is recorded in the late seventeenth century by the phrase "obey man." The record is located at PRO, CO 9/10, Fol. 89 and has been unavailable for analysis in this study.
130 Ibid.
whether the practice derives from natural or demonic practice, illustrated his conceptual understanding of witchcraft lore. Secondly, Walduck articulated that other whites believe in Obeah's efficacy, and even fear the practice. This could illustrate a continued belief in witchcraft practices in the British Caribbean during the beginning of the eighteenth century. Consequently, this makes Walduck's letters not only remarkable for being one of the earliest mentions of Obeah practice by name but his rhetoric towards Obeah's supernatural legitimacy, although expressing a measure of skepticism at times, is one of very few to not trivialize the practice in the eighteenth century. Looking at Walduck's remarks alongside Charles Leslie's observations in 1740 highlights the fact that Walduck perhaps wrote at a critical time where his indifference to the supernatural practitoning of Obeah was more common. Charles Leslie, writing thirty years after Walduck, and five years after British witchcraft was decriminalized, explicitly infantilized the belief in Obeah. Leslie described a sacred Obeah ritual which was administered when the enslaved community believed a theft had taken place. He observed that the community would gather around and,

They range themselves in that spot of ground which is appropriated for the negroes burying-place, and one of them opens a grave. He who acts the Priest (Obeahman), takes a little of the earth, and puts into everyone of their mouths; they say, that if any had been guilty, their belly swells, and occasions their Death. I never saw any instance of this but one; and it was certainly fact that a boy did swell, and acknowledged the theft when he was dying; but I am far from thinking there was any connection betwixt the cause and the effect; for a thousand accidents might have occasioned it, without accounting for it by that foolish ceremony.\textsuperscript{131}

Thus, after Walduck the documentation pertaining to Obeah divorces it from any spiritual legitimacy, marking its supernatural efficacy as illegitimate as African religions were in

\textsuperscript{131} Leslie, 308.
the seventeenth century. The most proficient way to contextualize Walduck's claims of the white colonial fear of black bewitchment is alongside this history of witchcraft lore in England. Walduck’s last letter ended with the statement,

One would wonder how these simple creatures in everything else should come by the knowledge of destroying at a distance without any application. But when we considered how Ancient Idolatory and what a busie Agent the Divell is to doe and propagate mischief our admiration will cease. In fine, I am forced to doe violence to my Reason, to believe anything of it.132

This statement, when compared with his previous observations shows Walduck in a sort of liminal space concerning witchcraft belief, in which he was both unsettled and questioning. Thomas Walduck, therefore, reveals the complex context of supernatural skepticism in the Atlantic World during this time.

Skepticism regarding witchcraft attacked the reality of some or even all of the fundamental attributes of witches and varied from moderate questioning to radical opposition to the institution of witch-hunting.133 While witchcraft skepticism existed alongside witchcraft belief throughout the early modern period, it became more pronounced in the sixteenth century with the publication of Englishman Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Scot's work attacked the confessions of witches by arguing they were instead mentally ill and even denied the Devil any spiritual or corporeal power. Scot further asserted that humans could only inflict harm through natural means, and as a result, any associated crime would be poisoning and not witchcraft.134

132 Barbados Museum and Historical Society. 149.
134 Ibid, 1046; Elmer, 32.
skeptics of witchcraft continued to debate the reality of witches on judicial, medical, and theological grounds well into the seventeenth-century, where in England and Scotland the works of Robert Filmer, John Wagstaffe, John Webster, and Francis Hutchinson were becoming more widely disseminated.\(^{135}\) Francis Hutchinson’s *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718) is famed for its dismissal of witchcraft belief on the grounds of rationality and assertion that most witchcraft was naturally caused.\(^{136}\) Interestingly enough, Hutchinson communicated his skepticism to Hans Sloane in 1712 – the same year Walduck recorded his observations of Obeah. Hutchinson observed the 1712 witchcraft trial of Jane Wenham and was disturbed by the level of superstition that found the woman guilty, and wrote that there was “a very great deal of the same folly and imprudence” shown by authorities in other trials.\(^{137}\) These debates surrounding supernatural skepticism trickled down from educated elites to the broader lay population, and at the beginning of the eighteenth-century witch-hunting was in steep decline across the British Isles, with the exception of Scotland, which maintained belief long into the eighteenth-century. However, independent belief in witchcraft would continue to linger until direct actions were taken to

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\(^{135}\) Ibid, 1048.


\(^{137}\) Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*. Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 96-7. This is an excerpt. The original document is stored BL Sloane Mc 4043: f.38 however has been unavailable for this study; See also, Francis Bragge, *A Full and Impartial Account of the Discovery of Sorcery and Witchcraft: Practis’d by Jane Wenham of Walkerne in Hertfordshire, upon the Bodies of Anne Thorn, Anne Street, &c. The Proceedings against Her from Her Being First Apprehended, till She Was Committed to Gaol by Sir Henry Chauncy. Also Her Tryal at the Assizes at Hertford before Mr. Justice Powell, Where She Was Found Guilty of Felony and Witchcraft and Receiv’d Sentence of Death for the Same, March 4, 1711-12*. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, (London: Printed for E. Curll, at the Dial and Bible against St. Dunstan’s Church in Fleetstreet, 1712).
quell superstition in 1735. In 1735, the English parliament enacted the Witchcraft Act, repealing James I’s 1604 act and no longer punishing witchcraft as a viable crime, although Scottish Parliamentarians objected to this change, as they continued to support trials for witchcraft as a means of promoting their notion of a godly state.\footnote{Owen Davies, \textit{Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736-1951}, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 12.} The enactment of this act was in response to growing skepticism to witchcraft across Europe, in which belief was falling out of style, both politically and religiously. Instead of a significant spiritual threat, belief in witchcraft was more of a threat to Britain's newly enlightened state; after the 1735 act, the fight against evil dissipated from intellectual works and instead, the war was waged against ignorance and superstition within the unenlightened masses.\footnote{Davies 1-2.} This was achieved by a provision making it illegal to pretend to practice witchcraft, and reads similarly to the Anti-Obeah acts from 1760 onwards throughout the Anglo-Caribbean.\footnote{The 1760 Obeah Act in Jamaica similarly prohibits “pretending to have Communication with the Devil” and “deluding” the “weak and superstitious.” An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760, in CO 139/21, The National Archives, UK.} Additionally, the move towards targeting the continued belief in witchcraft as something potentially dangerous to English enlightened society similarly echoes Thomas Hobbes 1650 statements criticizing false beliefs. This provision in the 1735 act reads,

\begin{quote}
And for the more effectual preventing and punishing of any Pretences to such Arts or Powers as are before mentioned, whereby ignorant Persons are frequently deluded and defrauded; be it further enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That if any Person shall, from and after the said Twenty-fourth Day of June, pretend to exercise or use any kind of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjuration, or undertake to tell Fortunes, or pretend, from his or her Skill or Knowledge in any occult or crafty Science, to discover where or in what manner any Goods or Chattels, supposed to have been stolen or lost, may be found, every Person, so offending,
\end{quote}
being thereof lawfully convicted on Indictment or Information in that part of Great Britain called England.¹⁴¹

Despite the legislative efforts to quell superstitions, the discourse concerning witchcraft and magic never entirely dissolved; it only changed and modernized, away from judicial processed to informal lynch mobs over time.¹⁴² For instance, in 1751 the rural English town of Tring erupted into the public sphere for witch-hunting. A lynch-mob attacked elderly couple John and Ruth Osborne claiming the two were witches. As a result, the group drowned Ruth, and beat John to death; the trial culminated in the hanging death of Thomas Colley, the leader of the mob.¹⁴³ This is to say, that the beginning of the eighteenth century was a complicated time for supernatural beliefs in the British Atlantic World. Thus, Thomas Walduck, writing in 1710-1713, occupied an uncertain place for the affirming or denouncing of witchcraft and magic. Walduck wrote his letters from a middle ground of contextual conflict; between the increased dissemination of intellectual skepticism but yet, before the formal decriminalization of witchcraft in the British Isles, and the uncertainty of the efficacy or legitimacy of Obeah practices and African religions, his letter reflects this liminal space. Further, the rise of skepticism and English legislative attack on superstitious belief systems are integral to the way Obeah was suppressed in the post-1760 world.

The period from 1650 until 1740 illuminates many factors that contribute to the suppression of Obeah in the British Caribbean. Chiefly, the infantilization of African peoples and spirituality through religious ‘Othering,’ and secondly, the liminal space

¹⁴² Davies, 1.

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Obeah occupied in the changing supernatural epistemologies of Europeans. Therefore, the introduction of the African-derived magical practitoning occurred in a transformative period for the English Atlantic, resulting in the stripping away of the foundations of African religions. Despite few references to Obeah by name in this period, Obeah as a spiritual practice rested on the foundations of African derived religions to imbue practitioners with power, belief, and a sense of community. For this reason, the Christianization of slaves and trivialization of existing African-derived religions should be seen as one mechanism in the suppression of Obeah. Since African religiosity was stereotyped as unorganized and illegitimate, it brings into question what the English conceived to be tolerable and intolerable beliefs in the Protestant Atlantic world. European Witchcraft debates occurring alongside the early expansion of the slave plantation system most certainly impacted the way the English responded to African magical practitioners. This is seen most clearly in the identification of sorcery, the decline of witchcraft belief, Thomas Walduck's letters, and the wording of the 1735 Witchcraft Act. In this analysis, there are similarities between witchcraft and Obeah, only they operate in separate spheres. For Europeans who believed in magic, witchcraft was anti-Christian and Pagan. When skepticism took hold in the eighteenth century, criticisms of witchcraft beliefs condemned the practice as being nonsensical and pretended; similar to the way conversations about Obeah occur after this period, when practitioners and believers are referred to as charlatans or pagans requiring conversion. Thus, the English history of witchcraft and sorcery primed them for their confrontations with Obeah. Despite the British dismissal of African-derived religions and witchcraft beliefs, Obeah in the eighteenth-century Caribbean only became more visible. While white belief in its supernatural efficacy was waning, Obeah still represented a form
of dangerous spirituality, one that had the tools to affect the bodily health of white colonists and the political authority to incite enslaved rebellion; and by Hobbesian logic, the belief in the practice is more dangerous to the community than the practice itself.
Chapter 2: Sugar and Insurrection 1740-1780

When English authorities contested African spiritual practices and reconfigured the racial boundaries of Protestantism – they also attempted to ensure the security of the sugar plantations themselves. Late seventeenth-century slave codes had previously sought to police African's behaviours and restrict their movements within plantation societies. However, from 1740 to 1780, white colonist’s safety concerns were at a high amidst enslaved African’s poison conspiracies, the first Maroon Wars, and notably, Tacky's War in 1760, all of which featured Obeah practices. This chapter thus investigates Obeah at its height of visibility – through its association with rebellion. The responses to Obeah and insurrection from colonial officials and colonists are complex. On the one hand, the religious foundations of Obeah were contested by white colonists as pagan superstitions, and English elites were becoming increasingly skeptical toward the supernaturalism and demonology that had lain behind the trials for witchcraft in the British Isles. This led to the frequent trivialization of Obeah's preternatural faculties. On the other hand, during this period from 1740 to 1780 Obeah elicited anxious responses by whites due to its potential for physical danger. Despite whites not believing in the supernatural efficacy of Obeah, the enslaved belief system became more dangerous to the plantation system. Thus, Obeah came to represent a corporeal fear, one that was incompatible with the success of the emerging plantation societies in the British Caribbean.

This chapter argues that both the socially positive and negative goals of Obeah became exaggerated by the white authorities and inextricably linked to enslaved insurrection as the British concern for the security and profitability of the colonial project in the Caribbean grew. Furthermore, Obeah was inspirational in facilitating rebellion in two respects. First, the practitioner's proficiency in herbalism and the creation of supernatural 'fetishes' created concern over poisoning plots and were a direct threat to the bodily health of white colonists. Secondly, practitioners utilized the shared African supernatural beliefs to unite the enslaved community under the common goal of rebellion. In both actions, Obeah practitioners posed a political threat to the colonial system and required immediate suppression by legislators.

To understand where Obeah sits in the analysis of enslaved rebellion, we must first establish how Obeah was practiced within enslaved communities and with what social goals. Chiefly, Obeah is a syncretic religious practice developed through creolization in the Caribbean. However, Obeah rests on a foundation of indigenous West African religious systems and closely follows that model in the ritual invocation of fetishes, spells, and charms. More accurately, historians trace Obeah back to the Ashanti-Fanti, who resided in the Gold Coast region, now, modern day Ghana. Obeah then has many consistent elements of belief to West African religious systems. At the core of these beliefs are the

146 Handler and Bilby, Notes and documents - On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean, 89-93; Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 155.
spiritual hierarchies relating to ancestral spirits. In this understanding, God grants the ancestors, who are founders of the clan, tribe, or ethnic groups, with power over their descendants.\(^{147}\) These ancestors act as protective spiritual agents but also, as a judge of moral behaviour and source of punishment for their community.\(^{148}\) In the Caribbean, Obeahmen and women provided a preternatural link between ancestral spirits and the community. It is also through ancestral and more malevolent forces that Obeah practitioners derived their power. In a community, the Obeah practitioners could be consulted for a number of reasons: to cast a spell for protection of property or loved ones, bring good fortune, or restore ill health. Obeah could also be used to exact revenge against enemies, both in and outside of the community. These goals could be achieved through ritual incantation, use of herbalism to create potions and fetishes, and traditional oath-taking ceremonies.\(^{149}\) It is within these ethnic communities that Obeah practitioners served, protected, and concealed themselves on slave plantations in the Caribbean. It is also through these associations with preternatural magic, herbalism, and the enslaved community that Obeah came into conflict with the slave-dependent plantation system in the British Caribbean from 1740 to 1780.

The slave plantation societies in the British Caribbean by 1740 were overwhelmingly African. Sugar production was so destructive that the enslaved African labour force was incapable of reproducing itself. Therefore, slaveholders were dependent

\(^{147}\) Magesa, 47.  
\(^{148}\) Ibid, 48.  
\(^{149}\) Fernández Olmos, Paravisini-Gebert, 131.
on the slave trade. This dependency meant that the importation of Africans increased, which likewise imported African religious systems, and caused hybrid cultural and spiritual practices to flourish. These factors led whites to recognize Obeah as a threat to the security of the profitable sugar enterprise and the bodily health of whites in the British Caribbean.\footnote{Richard S Dunn, \textit{Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 236-238.}

It is against this backdrop moving into the mid-eighteenth century that Obeah became most visible in British discussions of enslaved insurrection.

**Profit and The Sugar Works**

In the seventeenth century, arguably the most motivating factor for Caribbean migration for Europeans was the opportunity for profit. Whether it was slave trading, lumbering, privateering, or farming, Barbados, Jamaica, and the Leeward Islands offered numerous options for financial success for adventurous English colonials. For planters, the cultivation of indigo, cotton, ginger, and tobacco offered steady profit but failed to make the Caribbean colonies significant in the eyes of the English metropole.\footnote{Thomas Dalby, \textit{An Historical Account of the Rise and Growth of the West-India Colonies and of the Great Advantages They Are to England, in Respect to Trade, Licenced According to Order: By Sir Thomas Dalby}, (London, 1690),415.; Dunn, 188.} When sugar production began in the 1640s Barbados, it quickly eclipsed all other crop production on the island, earning higher profits than any other English colonial commodity by the end of the seventeenth century.\footnote{Dunn, 188.} Sugar production took off after a slow start in the 1670s in Jamaica but by 1750 it was producing more sugar than all the British Caribbean islands combined over the
previous fifty years.\footnote{Ibid, 204.} Jamaica's sugar revolution peaked at the end of the Maroon War in 1739, and three years later the number of sugar works on the island doubled totalling 377; financially, at the end of the 1740s Jamaica's annual exports totalled £2.4 million.\footnote{Brown, 15.} Wealth for the owners aside, harvesting sugar cane was slow and laborious work which demanded significant plantation space for the planting of the cane, and necessary equipment for the actual process of milling, pressing, boiling, separating, cleaning, and drying process of harvesting.\footnote{Dalby, 414-417, Dalby also recommended that for each 100 acres of land to run a sugar plantation would require a minimum of fifty black slaves, seven white servants, six horses and eight oxen. To govern them requires an overseer, a doctor, a farrier and a carter. This for Dalby highlights the expensive cost of running a successful plantation, and furthermore, he continues to detail the exact steps needed to organize a plantation and cultivate sugar.} To operate the plantation, the Caribbean sugar planter had to be a combination of a farmer, manufacturer, and entrepreneur, supervising the workforce and creating financial opportunities.\footnote{Dunn, 189.} With increased sugar production, the demand for more enslaved labour grew, and by 1788 estimates state that the enslaved made up 90% of the population of Jamaica.\footnote{Ibid.} Exact numbers are difficult to locate for each period, especially given the high mortality rate of enslaved people in the British Caribbean. The plantation system was notoriously brutal, and sugar planting specifically was dangerous and painful work, compounded with the punishment and general conditions of slavery, the death rates of slaves were high.\footnote{Ibid.} However, high mortality only increased the demand for slaves, further exacerbating the black to white population discrepancy.

\footnote{Leslie, 306.}
With the rising enslaved population and the peak of the ‘sugar revolution’ from the 1740s to the 1780s whites became significantly outnumbered, in fact, Jamaica and Barbados saw a 25% increase in slaves trafficked to the islands in 1740-1780 than in the previous four decades. The increasing enslaved population was a point anxiously made by many white travellers and colonists. Englishman Charles Leslie commented on this anxiety in 1740 after describing an Obeah-related enslaved ritual that,

They are so far superior in numbers to the whites, that one should think it would be unsafe, considering all circumstances, to live amongst them. The reasons of the planter’s security are these: the slaves are brought from several places in Guiney, which are different from one another in language, and consequently they can’t converse freely; or if they could, they hate one another so mortally, that some of them would rather die by the hands of the English, than join with other Africans in an attempt to shake off their yoke. None of them are allowed to touch any arms, unless by their master’s command, or go out of the bounds of the plantation to which they belong, without a special permit signed by their owner or overseer […]

Leslie’s reassurance to his reader that planters should not fear rebellion despite the superior number of the enslaved illustrates a longer pattern of concern for a growing black population. Similar efforts to quell white anxieties about the white to black population discrepancy is evident in the earlier works of Richard Ligon (1657) and Richard Blome (1672). Ligon remarked,

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159 “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.” Emory University, 2019, slavevoyages.org; in 1700-1740 it is estimated that 345,447 slaves disembarked in Barbados and Jamaica. In 1740-1780 it is estimated that 433,043 slaves disembarked in those two islands.
160 Leslie, 310-311.
161 Ligon, 74-77; Richard Blome and Thomas Sir Lynch, A Description of the Island of Jamaica: With the Other Isles and Territories in America, to Which the English Are Related: Taken from the Notes of Sr. Thomas Linch, Knight, Governour of Jamaica, and Other Experienced Persons in the Said Places: Early English Books Online, (London: Printed by T. Milbourn and sold by the Book-sellers of London and Westminster, 1672), 91-92.
it has been accounted a strange thing, that the Negres, being more then double the numbers of the Christians that are there, and they accounted a bloody people, where they think they have power or advantages; and the more bloody, by how much they are more fearfull than others: that these should not commit some horrid massacre upon the Christians, thereby to enfranchise themselves, and become Masters of the Iland.\(^{162}\)

Ligon continued to give three reasons as to why white colonists should not fear insurrectionary practices from the enslaved. First, he stated that slaves did not have access to weapons. Secondly that the conditions of slavery have made them fearful of punishment resulting from any attempt. Lastly, according to Ligon, slaves cannot conspire together because they speak many different languages, and by nature of the slave trade, different ethnic groups are trafficked together which leaves them unable to understand each other.\(^{163}\)

Ligon’s remarks read similarly to both Richard Blome and Sir Thomas Lynch’s *A Description of the Island of Jamaica* (1672) and Charles Leslie’s *A New History of Jamaica* (1740). The authors expressing the same sentiments may indicate that Blome, Lynch, and Leslie drew on Ligon’s work, and that the discourse on enslaved rebellion bore repeating 80 years later. This also shows that the concern for white safety and enslaved insurrection had been growing in relation to the developing sugar revolution, and by the 1730s, this fear was more pronounced. This continued anxiety, however, was not solely due to increased enslaved population, but due in part to the Maroon Wars in Jamaica. The Jamaican Maroons were established when the English defeated the Spanish colonists for control of the island in 1655. As the Spanish fled, the Africans they had enslaved absconded and

\(^{162}\) Ligon, 74.  
\(^{163}\) Ligon, 74-75.
joined the Jamaican indigenous population to create the windward Maroon communities in a region of long mountain ranges and thick forests now known as the Blue Mountains.\textsuperscript{164} As the English settled, they were ultimately unable to establish control and settlement over the whole island, and a significant portion remained in the control of the Maroons. Over the course of the seventeenth-century, many slaves fled enslavement and joined the windward and leeward Maroon communities, typically following enslaved revolts. The tensions between British forces and Maroons reached a high in 1728 with the First Maroon War and came to a close with peace treaties in 1739-1740. This conflict resulted in several hundred killed, and approximately a quarter of a million British pounds in damages.\textsuperscript{165}

With increased anxieties over insurrectionary practices, planters employed various strategies to quell any further attempts. Early slave codes in Barbados (1661, 1678, 1688) and Jamaica (1664, 1673, 1696) sought to eradicate the potential for insurrectionary practices by the enslaved, by promoting overseers’ surveillance in slave quarters for poisons and weapons, limiting enslaved movement beyond plantation grounds, and banning drumming in traditional rituals as security for white planters.\textsuperscript{166} Further, plantation owners avoided placing large groups of the same ethnicity on a plantation to discourage communication in hopes of maintaining linguistic barriers to unity. Despite this, enslaved

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{164}{Dunn, 152-153, 257-261.}
\footnote{165}{Michael Craton, \textit{Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 87.}
\end{footnotes}
peoples used traditional African practices to help send messages over long distances using drums and other instruments, increasing white anxieties.\(^{167}\)

The changing environment of the British Caribbean to a “sugar colony” created a socio-economic climate for the fears of enslaved insurrectionary practices to propagate. Exacerbated by European beliefs in witchcraft being linked to rebellion in the centuries prior – it comes as little surprise that Obeah practices fits neatly within this conversation. In fact, Europeans had an established history of relating religious dissenting groups and esoteric practices with rebellion as early as the sixteenth-century. The connection between witchcraft and rebellion in England and Scotland can be seen especially clearly in James I’s *Demonolatry* in which he promotes understanding of a ‘great chain of being’ and authority places God at the top and connected everything downwards to each individual. Witches then, represented insubordination, rebellion, and even treason against political authority residing higher on the chain. This connection between witchcraft and political rebellion is consistent with James I’s involvement in the witch trial in North Berwick, Scotland in 1590, where witches were believed to conspire against him by raising storms to sink his ship and using poison extracted from a frog to curse him from afar.\(^{168}\) While the European association between malefic witchcraft and rebellion far predates the British colonial attack on Obeah, it is vital to illustrate that these beliefs have a long history and were not simply birthed and weaponized against black spirituality in the 18th century. It further brings Obeah closer to discussions of dangerous spirituality and witchcraft as a part

\(^{167}\) Craton, 47.
of a larger Atlantic trend of suppression of alternative forms of religious expression and
ritual practice. For Obeah in the British Caribbean between 1740 and 1780, this particularly
develops through fears of enslaved practitioners utilizing herbal knowledge and
potentially, spiritual weapons or fetishes, to poison.

Poison and Rebellion

The image of an older person gathering herbs, items such as animal bones, teeth, blood, or
feathers, and creating a malicious salve or poison imbued with preternatural power was not
unfamiliar to both Europeans and Africans, and the anxiety over the practitioner’s intent
was similar in the early modern world. That is because the fear that an unknown, often
unseen agent affecting the bodily health is universal; it is the supernatural imposition,
whether diabolic or preternatural, that created a cultural difference.\textsuperscript{169} Whether it was
demonic power giving strength to a witch’s salve, or malicious spirits aiding an esoteric
spiritual fetish, the underlying fear of poisoning affected communities in every location. In
the mid eighteenth-century British Caribbean, these existing cultural anxieties exploded
when introduced to the oppressive context of enslavement, and the British preoccupation
with the plantation profits. Obeah, which became the named term for all African spiritual
practices misunderstood by white observers, becomes central to this anxiety.

Europeans had a long history of fearing racialized people and their perceived
propensity for poisoning plots. The middle ages saw accusations of Jews travelling from
place to place and dispensing a poisonous powder into wells of Christian communities. In

\textsuperscript{169} Ronald Hutton, “Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft: Potential for a New
particular, during an epidemic in the 1320s, first Lepers then Jews were believed to be responsible for a conspiracy to poison the wells, killing otherwise healthy Christians in France.\textsuperscript{170} The poison was said to be made from human blood, urine, unspecified herbs, and a consecrated host— all dried and reduced to powder and placed in small bags. These items and methods of poisoning are important because similar descriptions are used by the English when discussing African-derived spirituality.\textsuperscript{171} These types of poisoning accusations almost always followed a large outbreak of the plague, the last in England being in 1665. Europeans linking natural devastation to malicious intent or supernatural phenomena is common.\textsuperscript{172} For instance the concern for malicious poisoning had been enveloped in the European conceptions of witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where widespread panic, rumours, and confession detailed witches receiving a poisonous salve from the Devil and instructed to utilize it against community members and livestock, which negatively affected the financial stability of the owners.\textsuperscript{173} Poisoning accusations even fell on folk healers who practice 'white magic' (non-demonic) due to their ritual materials that could easily be interpreted as harmful. For example, Scottish folk healer, Alexander Drummond was charged in Scotland for the crime of 'charming.' Drummond had been an established folk healer with unspecified "unorthodox religious practices." He accepted financial compensation for curing physical, spiritual, and mental

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\textsuperscript{170} Carlo Ginzburg, and Raymond Rosenthal.\textit{ Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 34-35.  \\
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 35.  \\
\textsuperscript{172} Levack, \textit{The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe}, 60.  \\
\textsuperscript{173} Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery,” 239.
\end{flushright}
illness using Amulets, clothes, stones, water, and powders. He used these items to create protective pouches and drinks for clients. However, after an accusation that Drummond was aligned with the Devil since birth, and had a demonic familiar spirit aiding him, he was arrested and tried in Edinburgh.\textsuperscript{174} This case parallels eighteenth-century British reactions to Obeah practitioners, who viewed spiritual weapons and religious material culture was a sign of more extensive insurrectionary practices.\textsuperscript{175} Therefore, the British interpretation of Magical poisoning at home predisposed them to interpret African spiritual practices as dangerous, and potentially treasonous.

In West African societies, spiritual power played a significant part of daily life. Physical items and substances were integrated into the spiritual world. Often used in ritual context, religious fetishes or power items could be created and employed for positive and negative goals, as well as consumable substances that drew on preternatural and natural herbal knowledge. When Europeans encountered this in slave plantations, it was often translated as poison.\textsuperscript{176} Consequently, Africans who were forced to the British Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries showed a common understanding of the intersections between preternatural practitioners and the possible pharmacological harm it could cause through poisoning.\textsuperscript{177}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Paton, \textit{The Cultural Politics of Obeah}, 98-99.}
\footnote{Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery”, 243.}
\footnote{Ibid, 248.}
\end{footnotes}
By the 1730s white Europeans in the Caribbean were showing little interest in the idea of supernatural poisoning through witchcraft. This can be attributed to the long development of skepticism refuting the Devil’s role in illness, and sixteenth century skeptics like Reginald Scot and Johann Weyer explaining preternatural phenomena through medical and natural diagnoses. These developments, alongside scientific, medical, and intellectual developments lead to a better, non-supernatural, explanation of pharmacology and human biology. The resulting disbelief in magical practitoning is reflected in the patronizing tone used to describe Obeah-related practices and African religiosity as a whole. However, the disbelief in African spiritual weapons did not mean Obeah was not regarded as a threat to the colonists and colonial plantation system. Instead, two possible dangers were communicated in response to enslaved poison as an insurrectionary practice. First, whether or not esoteric beliefs were used in the preparation of alleged poisons, enslaved practitioners had a demonstrated proficiency with medicinal herbs and natural medicine. They were so proficient that there are recorded incidences of white planters and

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178 See: Reginald Scot, *Scot’s Discovery of Witchcraft: Proving the Common Opinions of Witches Contracting with Divels, Spirits, or Familiars; and Their Power to Kill, Torment, and Consume the Bodies of Men Women, and Children, or Other Creatures by Diseases or Otherwise: Their Flying in the Air, &c. To Be but Imaginary Erronious Conceptions and Novelties; Wherein Also, the Lewde Unchristian Practices of Witchmongers ...* Is Notably Detected. Also the Knavery and Confederacy of Conjurors ... The Horrible Art of Poisoning and All the Tricks and Conveyances of Juggling and Liegerdemain Are Fully Deciphered. With Many Other Things Opened That Have Long Lain Hidden: ... Whereunto Is Added, a Treatise upon the Nature, and Substance of Spirits and Divels, &c. All Written and Published in Anno 1584. by Reginald Scot, Esquire. (London: printed by Richard Cotes, 1651); Johann Weyer, George Mora, and Benjamin G. Kohl. *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer, De Praestigiis Daemonum*. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies; v. 73. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1991)
overseers seeking medical treatment from black practitioners.\textsuperscript{179} While not particularly common, some planters took advantage of Obeah healers to treat enslaved labourers, and themselves, in the absence of qualified doctors. One Jamaican planter confessed, “I have myself made use of their skill…with great success.”\textsuperscript{180} This, however, should not be taken as an endorsement, but rather Caribbean planters suppressed and maligned Obeah when it suited their goals, and infrequently employed them when necessary.\textsuperscript{181} This occurrence also illustrates that planters recognized and trusted Obeah practitioner’s medicinal knowledge, which perhaps facilitated concerns over practitioners who could utilize poisonous flora and fauna to their advantage. Thus, even though the legitimacy of the preternatural side of Obeah poisoning was in question— the herbal knowledge of practitioners still posed a significant danger to the planters and overseers in close proximity to the enslaved.

Secondly, while white colonists expressed very little belief in the preternatural abilities of Obeah practitioners, Africans who were familiar with the spiritual and religious systems held a strong belief in its physical efficacy. In particular, enslaved Africans believed that Obeahmen and women could induce physical ailments and treat illnesses through preternatural means for both whites and blacks on the island. This unifying belief was still a problem for white colonists because the enslaved could be inspired by this power, utilize it as a weapon in revolt, or even afflict white colonists with it. Thus, the

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid; the complete transcription of this account resides in House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol.xxvi:no.646 and was unavailable for this study.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
white colonial suppression of Obeah during the Sugar Revolution was centred on eradicating poisoning plots. This, however, was not as straightforward as enacting a slave code against harming whites. The colonial authorities and plantocracy had to respond to the enslaved preternatural beliefs focused on their spiritual weapons, without affording it any legitimacy in the post-1735 age of skepticism. This is necessary because spiritual weapons or instances of poisoning plots were not always pharmacologically dangerous to the bodily health of whites but held significant spiritual authority in the minds of the enslaved.\textsuperscript{182}

Proximity was also a point of concern, with the enslaved having close contact with their owners and overseers, the concern over poisons being discreetly given to whites was quite pronounced.\textsuperscript{183} In Bermuda in 1730 and 1755, two highly publicized poisoning plots underscored this anxiety. In 1730, authorities brought an elderly mulatto woman named Sarah ‘Sally’ Bassett before the Grand Jury of the Court of Assizes accused of ordering the distribution of poison to her granddaughter’s white owners; this poison was a mixture of natural herbs and symbolic powders which lead historians to believe Bassett was an Obeahwoman. This poison was intended to be dispersed during the preparation of food to two white owners and another enslaved woman. Her indictment stated, "For that she the said Sarah Bassett, not having the fear of God before her Eyes, but being moved and seduced by ye Instigation of the Devil."\textsuperscript{184} For her alleged crime, Bassett was found guilty

\textsuperscript{182} Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery”, 252.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid, 237.
and burned alive. Before Sarah Bassett's case, there was a scarce record of poisoning plots by the enslaved; after, however, Bermudan authorities tried multiple people for poisoning in 1755. This type of reaction follows pre-existing European patterns in witch-hunting when one case would spark dozens in a short amount of time. In particular, Bermuda experienced a similar outbreak of witchcraft cases from 1650 to 1696 in which 22 white colonists were tried. Fifteen out of twenty-two trials occurred in the 1650s alone and resulted in five executions by hanging. A majority of the accusations centred on colonists making both humans (free and enslaved) and livestock ill or injured through spiritual invocation of some kind. However, it appears that by the time Sarah Bassett was found guilty of poisoning in 1730, the most egregious aspect of her alleged crime was the use of poison against slave-owners and was disconnected from concepts European concepts of magic. Thus, the spiritual invocation of power through fetishes or herbalism was an essential aspect of African religiosity, but to most white planters in the Caribbean, the medicinal practices or "bush medicine" of Obeahmen and women was cast as a dangerous superstition. This can also be seen as early as the transatlantic passage.

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185 Ibid, 48, 51, 64. The only complete transcription of this court record resides in the Bermuda Archives.
186 Ibid, 64-65.
187 See: H.F A true and exact relation of the severall informations, examinations, and confessions of the late witches; Potts, Thomas, and Edward Sir. Bromley. The Vwonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster: VWith the Arraignement and Triall of Nineteene Notorious Witches, at the Assizes and General Gaole Delieverie, Holden at the Castle of Lancaster, Vpon Munday, the Seuenteenth of August Last, 1612. By Thomas Potts Esquier. ( London: Printed by W. Stansby for Iohn Barnes, and are to be sold at his shop neare Holborne Conduit, 1613).
189 Craton, 64.
On the 26th of May 1751, British slave ship captain later turned abolitionist, John Newton discovered an insurrection plot aboard *The Duke of Argyle* voyaging from the western coast of Africa to Antigua. The twenty Africans had broken free of their shackles and were on the verge of rebellion when caught and punished. Just days later on June 16th, Newton wrote of another attempt at resistance stating,

> in the afternoon we were alarmed with a report that some of the men slaves had found means to poysen the water in the scuttle casks upon deck, but upon enquiry found they had only conveyed some of their country fetishes, as they call them, or talismans into one of them, which they had the credulity to suppose must inevitably kill all who drank of it. But if it please God thay make no worse attempts than to charm us to death, they will not much harm us, but it shews their intentions are not wanting…

Newton and the crew trivialized the poison plot upon discovering that it derived from African spiritual idols, a seemingly less threatening form of insurrectionary practice. In the mid-eighteenth century with skepticism towards supernatural faculties more commonplace, and the delegitimizing of African religious practices as a whole, Newton’s response is unsurprising. Newton’s discourse however reveals the hesitation and complexities in casting African spirituality as an inherent threat. Chiefly, the crew was initially alarmed at the poison plot, but when discovered to have been employed through African notions of spiritual protection, the crew dismissed the threat. It is Newton’s last line of this journal entry which stated, “But if it please God thay make no worse attempts than to charm us to death, they will not much harm us, but it shews their intentions are not wanting” that is consistent with a pattern in white reactions to enslaved insurrection through preternatural faculties. The charms and fetishes used in Obeah-related attacks are

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191 Ibid, 56.
met with disbelief while the intent behind the action and the unifying attributes remain a threat to whites and the plantation security of the British Caribbean. This similarly occurred in Saint-Domingue in 1757.

Saint-Domingue was a French-Caribbean colony before the Haitian Revolution in 1791, and therefore, the methods of African-derived spiritual invocation took a slightly different syncretic form, popularly known as Vodou.192 Despite the geographic difference and creolized religious expression, Saint-Domingue is vital to the histories of enslaved insurrection, and poisoning in the British Caribbean. When insurrection occurred within Saint-Domingue, news travelled quickly to Jamaica, and at times affected even British sugar markets and legislative responses to plantation security. While this is most clearly seen during the Haitian Revolution in 1791, the rebellion plot called Makandal’s Conspiracy bears strong resemblances to events happening in the Anglo-Caribbean during the sugar revolution.193

In 1757, a Maroon spiritual priest named Makandal was known to create talismans using harvested plants and Catholic material culture in his practising, and utilized this knowledge to attempt to overthrow the French controlled colony.194 His primary method

192 Sidney W. Mintz, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Social History of Haitian Vodou.” In Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, edited by Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 123: Vodou is defined as a formal religion originating in Africa as a form of ancestor worship, practiced by Blacks of Haiti (Saint Domingue) and to some extent, other West Indian islands and the U.S. It is comparable to Obeah in the spiritual invocation of power through natural objects and Christian material cultures to achieve desired goals.
insurrection was creating an extensive network of slaves to carry out poisoning attacks on the water supply, livestock, white slave owners, and even enemy slaves from various plantations.\textsuperscript{195} For his role in the poisoning plot, Makandal was captured and burned alive in 1758. Both enslaved people and colonial authorities understood the poisoning and mobilization undertaken by Makandal as linked to his position as a religious leader in Saint-Domingue, and thus, he became symbolic of the dangers that could arise from enslaved spiritual power inciting mass uprisings.\textsuperscript{196} As historian Laurent Dubois states that “the extent of his activities and the publicity they gained helped set in motion a cycle of paranoia and violence that continued in Saint-Domingue for decades.”\textsuperscript{197} Makandal’s poisoning plot did not only influence how Saint-Domingue responded to enslaved insurrection moving forward, but this conspiracy sent ripple effects into islands in the British-Caribbean as well.\textsuperscript{198} The direct connection between poison and Obeah functions similarly in the Anglo world as Vodou and poison do in the French, with minor differences.\textsuperscript{199} The African’s knowledge of medicinal and toxic plants alongside the invocation of black spiritual power raised white concerns for the pharmacological danger Obeah poisoners posed. However, writings from white observers, indicate that poison was a multi-faceted problem. The physiological damage aside, spiritual poisoners had the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid, 51.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid, 56, 255.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid, 52.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{199} There is a noted increase in poisoning fears in France and French controlled colonies, this can be due to their history of witchcraft and the affair of the poisons. For more see, Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery.”
\end{footnotesize}
power of belief and political authority within their communities to inspire insurrectionary practices.

When Welsh naturalist and Reverend Griffith Hughes observed Obeah practices in Barbados and recorded his thoughts in 1750, he focused on the potential dangers arising from enslaved belief in esoteric poisons and Obeah practitioner’s power. Hughes also wrote what seems to be one of the fullest descriptions of Obeah in the British Caribbean. It is this description that became heavily cited throughout the rest of the colonial era and can be argued to colour modern understandings of Obeah practice. He prefaced the description by saying “The negroes get a good livelihood by the Folly and Ignorance of the rest of the Negroes” and marked Obeah as a pretended practice. And with The Natural History of Barbados, Hughes’ description of Obeah is inextricably tied to ritual medicine and a form of poisoning. However, standing at the centre of this is Hughes’ consistent discourse of black belief in Obeah’s power. The strength of this power, as he alluded to, is troubling. Hughes claimed,

The negroes in general are very tenaciously addicted to the rites, ceremonies, and superstitions of their own countries, particularly in their plays, dances, music, marriages, and burials. And even such as are born and bred up here cannot be entirely weaned from these customs: They stand much in awe of such as pass of Obeah negroes, these being a sort of physicians and conjourers, who can, as they believe, not only fascinate them, but cure them when bewitched by others. And if one negro believed that he is bewitched, the notion is so strongly riveted in his mind, that, medicines seldom availing he usually lingers till death puts an end to his fears.

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Hughes also illustrated how poison and African rituals could affect the bodily health of the enslaved, which he did not constitute as traditional acts of rebellion, but nonetheless affects the slave labour system that Barbados and Jamaica were dependent upon, especially in the period of the sugar revolution. Hughes described a spiritual inquest practiced by enslaved people on plantations that was intended to determine whether a person was guilty of a crime or moral transgressions like theft, sabotage, or adultery. This ritual was performed by an Obeahman or woman who would call on supernatural ancestral forces to guide the inquest.

Hughes described the facilitation of this by stating,

The Negroes take a piece of earth from the grave of their nearest relations or parents, if it can be had; if not from any other grave. This being mingled with water, they drink it, imprecating the divine vengeance to inflict an immediate punishment upon them; but in particular, that the water and mingled grave-dust which they have drank (if they are guilty of crime) may cause them to swell, and burst their bellies. Most of them are so firmly persuaded, that it will have this effect upon the guilty that few, if any (provided they are conscious of the imputed crime), will put the proof of their innocency upon the experiment.²⁰²

This is an excellent example of the types of poison imbued with preternatural faculties used by the enslaved. This mixture of grave-dirt and water alone would have minimal pharmacological effects on the body however, used in a ritual context, the Obeahman gave strength to this spiritual weapon. Moreover, the enslaved themselves ascribed to this belief, which further gives strength to the esoteric rituals of Obeahmen. This form of poison was still a significant threat to white plantation societies because it reveals the unity in esoteric belief. It was this belief that Hughes pointed out that poses a political problem. Groups of

²⁰² Ibid.
enslaved mobilizing behind the Obeahman or spiritual priest and their weaponry was what eventually thrust Obeah into visibility as an active agent of enslaved insurrection in 1760.

Poisoning then, through herbal means causing pharmacological danger, or through spiritual invocation, was central to both white and black understandings of rebellion, and in the Anglo-Caribbean became intimately tied to Obeah and African-derived spirituality. In the backdrop of the sugar revolution and with the inability for the plantocracy to conceive of any disruption to plantation labour, poisoning came to represent a powerful tool of the enslaved that required suppression; it was a power that was hidden but was also very close.203

**Political Authority, and Insurrection**

The spiritual connection between Obeahmen and the ancestral realm concerned white planters, but not necessarily because they believed in its reality, but for the fact that the enslaved Africans on the plantation most certainly did. Whether the enslaved sought an Obeah practitioner for help, or they lived in fear of their powers, the underlining belief in their efficacy was a powerful weapon against the colonial plantation society. Since Obeah incorporated various elements of West African belief systems and was creolized around plantation life and realities of slavery, it created a unified multi-ethnic community of oppressed peoples. Obeah then, could not only result in physical ailment as a result of African herbal knowledge of toxic plants, but it posed a more significant political problem.

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203 Dubois, 55.
The belief in Obeah practitioners’ powers as spiritual guides elevated their status amongst the enslaved and united them in a shared belief in its efficacy, as seen in the combined rebellion plot aboard John Newton's ship, and Makandal’s conspiracy. Scholars have indicated that white planters did not fully realize the link between Obeah and enslaved rebellion until after Tacky's War in 1760. While this may be partly true, the foundational linkages between African-derived spirituality as a form of political power clashed with the white colonial concern for the significant enslaved population and the disruption to sugar plantation societies through insurrection.

In taking advantage of the British preoccupation with the Seven Years War with the French and Spanish, a group of Coromantee African slaves began a revolt in St. Mary’s Parish, Jamaica on April 7th, 1760. Led by African-born slave, Chief Tacky, the rebellion spread into three phases of sustained action, affecting multiple parishes, destroying British forts, and raiding plantations. After the initial revolt, another broke out in Westmoreland Parish on May 25th, 1760 and was the largest battle of the conflict. From there the surviving rebels marched for several months through multiple parishes, raiding and burning down plantations along the way. The entirety of this insurrection lasted 18 months and resulted in £100,000 in property damage, the deaths of 60 whites, 500 blacks, and the transportation

204 Ibid, 46.
205 Brown, 144.
of an estimated 500 more.\textsuperscript{207} While academic scholarship tends to investigate Tacky’s War in relation to military strategy and enslaved insurrection, this revolt is rarely analyzed for being the most significant Obeah-assisted uprisings in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic.\textsuperscript{208}

As Coromantee Chief Tacky plotted the first revolt in St. Mary’s Parish, he did so alongside Obeah practitioners as his trusted counsellors.\textsuperscript{209} The Obeahmen concocted charms and protective fetishes to protect rebels against British weaponry. Furthermore, they utilized their sacred authority to disperse loyalty binding oaths out of a mixture of grave-dirt, blood, and rum, thus effectively mobilizing the rebels behind their esoteric belief and aiding the insurrection. Eventually, the British militia and allied Maroons put down the rebellion, but in its wake, the revolts left Obeah in a state of hyper-visibility. As a result, there were substantial political ramifications to be dealt with—Obeah practitioners’ role in the revolt had undermined the white observers’ persistent infantilization of the spiritual system and proved it could be used to incite violence against the colonial system. Jamaican authorities then had to take additional measures to disrupt the power and authority of Obeah practitioners – this was accomplished during the execution of rebels and leaders of the revolts. Historian Vincent Brown notes that execution methods for leaders and conspirators were notoriously brutal and included decapitation, burning alive, hanging, and dismemberment, often for show.\textsuperscript{210} For instance, after Chief Tacky was shot

\textsuperscript{207} In-depth literature pertaining to the revolt in Westmorland parish can be found in Thomas Thistlewood’s diaries. For more see: Douglas Hall, and Thomas Thistlewood. In *Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86*. (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1999.)
\textsuperscript{208} Turner Bryson, 63
\textsuperscript{209} Brown, *The Reapers Garden*, 149.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
and killed by Maroons, Jamaican authorities decapitated him and placed his head on a pole as a warning to the other slaves. However, Brown notes that the executions of Obeah practitioners were more theatrical in the display. These executions meant more than an ending of a life, but instead seemed to show Africans the death and suppression of their belief system, one that had threatened the security and success of white colonial mastery. One witness recounted the execution of an Obeahman following the revolt. In his act of defiance, the practitioner claimed that it was not within the power of white people to kill him. When he was in fact killed, the witness claimed that all black onlookers believed so strongly in his words that they were astonished that his execution was successful. In one of their more theatrical displays, executioners conducted several experiments using electrical charges and even an optical illusion—Magical Lanthorns. These experiments produced minimal effect, except on one practitioner who, through pain and exhaustion, admitted the white man’s Obeah exceeded his own. The actions directed against the Obeah co-conspirators not only illustrates the spiritual power they exercised over their enslaved community but also that Jamaican authorities understood their role in the insurrection to be tied to the African esoteric beliefs directing political action. However, executing Obeahmen involved in the rebellion was not a sufficient enough suppression technique for colonial authorities; mere months after the dust had settled from the revolt, legislators began crafting the first anti-Obeah ordinance.

211 Ibid.
1760 Anti-Obeah Legislation

The Jamaican authorities, having recognized the dangers associated with Obeah, allowed the money and status of sugar planters, who were deeply affected by the revolts, to influence the legislative process. In an effort to quell a future rebellion and consequently suppress African spirituality, Jamaica lawmakers drafted the first anti-Obeah law in December 1760, and it was enacted by June 1761. This law explicitly called for the death, imprisonment, or exile of any Obeah practitioners who claimed supernatural power. This act entitled, *An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from the Irregular Assemblies of Slaves* was initially intended to closely regulate various aspects of slave life in the wake of the revolt. Specifically, on Obeah it read,

And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah Men and Women, pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil spirits, whereby the weak and superstitious are deluded into a Belief of their having full Power to exempt them whilst under their Protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen Be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid that from and after the first day of June which will be in the year of our Lord One thousand Seven hundred and Sixty one [1761], any Negro or other Slave who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power, and be detected in making use of any Blood, Feathers, Parrots Beaks, Dogs Teeth, Alligators Teeth, Broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-shells or any other Materials relative to the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft in order to delude and impose on the Minds of others shall upon Conviction thereof before two Magistrates and three Freeholders suffer death or Transportation any thing in this Act or any other Law to the contrary notwithstanding.  

213 Thistlewood and Hall, 112; Brown, *The Reapers Garden*, 150.
Legislators, strongly influenced by the plantocracy, saw the destruction caused during Tacky’s War and asserted the Obeah practitioners had considerable power and influence within their community.\textsuperscript{215} A large part of the problem of Obeah post-insurrection was that they could use these “false” powers to convince slaves that they could be protected from harm while under the Obeah practitioners spell.\textsuperscript{216} The enactment of this legislation shows the most blatant tool of suppression against Obeah by acting as a means of cultural domination and social control.\textsuperscript{217} Dominating and regaining control was necessary for the continued success of the plantation system because the damage done was more detrimental than merely reconstructing lost property and wages— the rebelling slaves had shaken the confidence of white mastery on the island.\textsuperscript{218} This mastery, which was formed through Protestant supremacy in the seventeenth century, and subsequent attempts to secure Caribbean colonies from revolt, had seemingly failed, and these resulting anxieties are evident in the many diaries noting the aftermath of the revolt. A critical tool in the attempts to regain control and suppress Obeah is the language used in the discourse. The language used to remark upon and define African-derived spiritual practices is the biggest clue historians can get towards the shifting attitudes towards Obeah; in the period of the sugar revolution and after Tacky’s War, the language used to describe Obeah simultaneously infantilizes the enslaved belief, but warns of its dangerous qualities.

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\textsuperscript{215} Ibid, 26.  \\
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid, 2.  \\
\end{flushright}
At the forefront of the 1760 anti-Obeah law is the rhetoric surrounding Obeah as “pretended” nonsensical practice, specifically stating “Pretending to have communication with the Devil and other evil spirits” and “any negro or other slave who shall pretend to any supernatural power.” This reinforces white Christian mastery by invalidating African spirituality. This rhetoric, as previously discussed in chapter one, builds on earlier suppression techniques through religious othering. At the point in which Obeah enters legislation as a ‘pretended’ practice, it is subjected to a similar legislative categorization as European witchcraft post-1735. Furthermore, Obeah was not definitively defined within Jamaican law— which sets a precedent for other British Caribbean islands – and as a result without directly defining its practice, Obeah, through colonial law is understood as a nebulous, nonsensical spiritual belief, believed and practiced by ‘deluded’ slaves. Furthermore, what emerges out of the 1760 anti-Obeah act is the insistence that all purveyors of Obeah were ‘weak’ and ‘superstitious.’ The act even explicitly stated, “whereby the weak and superstitious are deluded into a Belief of their having full Power to exempt them whilst under their Protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen.” This section once again illuminates the complexities in how white colonial administration understood and responded to Obeah in the aftermath of the revolt. On the one hand, it relegates the enslaved belief to a form of lower-class superstition. On the other hand, it

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219 The 1735 Witchcraft Act repealing James I 1604 Act and decriminalizing witchcraft. However, this act forbid any person to falsely claim supernatural powers or to “pretend to exercise or use any kind of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjuration, or undertake to tell Fortunes, or pretend, from his or her Skill or Knowledge in any occult or crafty Science, to discover where or in what manner any Goods or Chattels, supposed to have been stolen or lost, may be found” Levack, “The Repeal of the English and Scottish Witchcraft Statutes, 1736.” In The Witchcraft Sourcebook. (London: Routledge, 2004), 188-190.
220 Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power, 2.
addresses the way in which enslaved people utilized their belief for protection— as seen in both Tacky’s War and Makandal’s Conspiracy. Despite the dismissive and infantilizing language used in the 1760 act, Obeah still posed a significant threat to the colonial system that cannot be ignored. Obeah as a threat to the bodily health of white Jamaicans and the success of sugar plantations through insurrection is what spawned the anti-Obeah Act in the first place. In fact, the language within the preamble is what reveals this intent most clearly and reminds the reader of Obeah’s connection to insurrection, despite the later trivializing rhetoric. The law’s preamble chiefly claimed that Obeahmen and women hid on many estates and plantations of Jamaica and “whose influence over the minds of their fellow slaves” presents “great dangers” that is “destructive of the peace and welfare of this island.” 221 Thus, while loosely defined and nebulous in core definition and attacked for its superstitious nature, Jamaican legislators pointedly associated the practice with its dangerous potential to influence the enslaved community, and foster insurrectionary practice. In the years following Tacky’s War, Obeah was suppressed by legislators as a political problem for the plantocracy and colonial powers. This transcended Jamaica, and the impact of the Anti-Obeah act is evident in travellers’ writings.

Joseph Senhouse was a midshipman in the India trade and later was appointed to the office of collector of customs at Bridgetown, Barbados where he recorded his observations on Obeah. In his time in the Caribbean, Senhouse took meticulous notes now combined into the Senhouse Papers which includes detailed records and account books, letter books, 

221 Ibid, 46.
and experiences as a customs officer in Barbados in 1799 entitled “Observations On Barbados.” In his writing, Senhouse articulated the existing themes tied to Obeah, like the propensity towards rebellion, and the supposed eradication of its belief through Christian conversion. However, at the heart, Senhouse’s 1799 comments on Obeah adopts the same rhetoric of ‘pretended’ and ‘deluded’ supernatural practices which were exacerbated by the 1760 Jamaican anti-Obeah legislation, despite Obeah not entering Barbadian legislation until 1816.

Senhouse wrote about African-born slaves,

> For we find them most commonly, sullen, perfidious and revengeful, and as they are ever ready to rebel, unless the utmost vigilance is observed to present them; a strict discipline tempered with humanity is required, to keep them in proper subjection. They are remarkably addicted, to the superstitious ceremonies of their country, such as music, Plays & Burials. This inclination, in a great degree of descends to their posterity, born and bred in the Island; paying unwaveringly, a great difference and respect, for such of their countrymen, as pass for Obeah Men. These pretended conjurers, they firmly believe, are enabled by means of their diabolical art, not only to fascinate them; but also to awe them, when bewitched by others of that internal tribe and when once a Negroe conceives himself inchanted, it is difficult and in many cases impossible, to eradicate that idea out of his mind, till death puts an end to his misery. It is notwithstanding about that the most notional of the Creoles, imagine the being made Christians, will effectually defend them from the powers of Obeah; and on this sole account, have sometimes requested to be baptized.

Senhouse’s writings affirm the conception, on the one hand, of Africans and Creoles as dangerous and prone to inciting rebellion. On the other, he also dispels Obeah as false and superstitious which, as seen in the period of early settlement, could be eradicated through conversion and baptism. Joseph Senhouse’s remarks then, similar to Thomas Walduck’s in 1710, occupied a liminal space of transitioning rhetoric towards Obeah in the

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223 Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power, 53-55.
post-1760 Caribbean; when Obeah is potentially dangerous—yet pretended. The colonial problem with Obeah then were its effects on the minds of the enslaved. At one point, as seen with Tacky’s War, Obeah practitioners could use the supernatural belief to exercise political authority through insurrection. After 1760, enslaved belief prevented them from being rational citizens—conflicting with notions of abolitionism.

In the decades following the 1760 Anti-Obeah law, Jamaican legislators only modified and re-clarified its criminalization in the 1780s. Where in the 1760 code, the relationship between Obeah and insurrection was made in the preamble simply stating that it was dangerous to the welfare of the island, the consolidated slave law of 1788 made this relationship direct and explicit.\(^\text{225}\) The minor wording change directly denounced “any slave who shall pretend to any supernatural power, in order to affect the lives of others or promote rebellion.”\(^\text{226}\) However, interestingly, in the clause directly following the Obeah ordinance in the 1788 Act the use of poisons was also criminalized. Further, this ordinance banned the use of poisons, even if that poison did not result in death. This specification was possibly included to address the enslaved esoteric beliefs in poisoning which was spiritually significant but did not produce any pharmacological affects— as seen with the poisoned water supply through ritual fetish aboard John Newton’s ship. Anthropologist Jerome Handler attributes the separation of the Obeah act in clause 40 and the poison act

\(^{225}\) Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power, 47.  
\(^{226}\) Jamaica. The New Act of Assembly of the Island of Jamaica, Intitled, An Act to Repeal an Act, Intitled, “An Act to Repeal Several Acts ... Respecting Slaves ... and for Other Purposes;” ... Commonly Called, the New Consolidated Act ... Passed ... by the Lieutenant Governor on the 6th Day of December, 1788 ; Published ... by Stephen Fuller. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. (London: Printed for B. White and Son, 1789), 20.
in clause 41 as an oversight on behalf of legislators— which was rectified in 1792 when it became illegal to use “any poisonous drug in the practice of Obeah.” In the end, the legislative efforts to suppress Obeah sought to quell future insurrectionary practices and protect the profitable British colonial system.

Through colonization and the sugar revolution, many facets of enslaved life, identity, and culture were fundamentally changed. The establishment of Protestantism in the British Caribbean provided enslaved people with a tenuous foothold into Christianity. However, this formation served to criticize, denounce, and suppress enslaved polytheistic religious and spiritual beliefs, as simply ‘superstitious.’ As the British Caribbean turned into the sugar colonies around 1730, and these creolized African spiritual practices became ‘Obeah,’ the white fixations changed from religious affiliation to plantation and white colonial security. Obeah then became one of the most visible targets by being identified as both a cause of, and tool for, insurrection. White fears were not entirely unfounded as enslaved spiritual practitioners employed both physical and spiritual weapons to exercise political authority. This is seen in both poisoning plots and esoteric belief systems unifying the enslaved community. Because of this association, Obeah explicitly entered the legislative discourses for the first time. After this point in 1760, it becomes evident that the British authorities attempted to honour the enlightened thinking and the decriminalization of British witchcraft, while simultaneously addressing the very real threat Obeah practitioners posed to the profitable colonial sugar project. The suppressive tactics used against Obeah practice, both legislative and cultural, attacked the socially beneficial goals

227 Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power, 47.
of Obeah. Healing practices could be used as evidence towards poisoning, and the communal belief in Obeah was seen as potentially rebellious and a sign of African ‘delusion’ and superstition. The enslaved belief in Obeah continued to be a focal point in British rhetoric towards African civility from 1780 onwards through the end of British slavery. Ultimately, the way Obeah was suppressed in this period does not simply change from religious and intellectual criticism to legislative defence against rebellion, but rather it adds to the way in which whites responded to enslaved spirituality and understood the practices. Similarly, this moves forward and is present in the abundant writings, court records, and laws around Obeah during the period of abolition.
Chapter 3: Obeah and Abolition 1780-1834

As this thesis suggested in chapter two, white colonists and British travellers began articulating a concern for Africans’ belief in Obeah after 1760. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, enslaved African's continued belief in Obeah became a noticeable topic in British discourses relating to abolitionism and the future of the slave-dependent sugar colonies. Beginning in the 1780s, the British empire’s slave and sugar market began facing its most formidable opposition—abolitionists. In 1783, the Religious Society of Friends formalized their long-standing discontent with the African slave-trade by submitting a petition signed by 273 Quakers to the House of Commons in London calling for the abolition of the slave-trade.\textsuperscript{228} The rise of the anti-slavery movement in the British Empire from this point coincided with the expansion of newspapers and other printed material, including that produced in the colonies, which allowed for the wide dissemination of sympathetic accounts of slave conditions on West Indian plantations, as well as in-depth looks into the lives and traditions of the enslaved.\textsuperscript{229}

This chapter situates Obeah in the context of ameliorative and abolitionist discourse ranging from 1780 to 1834. This chapter argues that Obeah became further suppressed as a result of both pro- and anti-slavery arguments portraying black spirituality as uncivilized, dangerous, and ignorant. Pro-slavery arguments tended to use descriptions of Obeah and Obeah-related crimes as evidence supporting the belief that Africans were incapable of being free citizens. Anti-slavery advocates to a lesser degree used paternalistic arguments

\textsuperscript{229} Brown, \textit{Reapers Garden}, 177.
to reference Obeah as a superstitious condition of slavery from which the enslaved could be liberated. These arguments are exemplified through paternalistic rhetoric centred on the effect Obeah had on the minds of the enslaved, the efforts of missionaries to instruct blacks in Christianity, and how Caribbean colonies criminalized Obeah in the nineteenth century.

Obeah, since its syncretic birth in the Caribbean, had been associated with ‘African-ness.’ Observers often described Obeah practitioners as natives of Africa, with some authors going as far to assert that Creole slaves were incapable of harnessing supernatural power; however, they also claimed that slaves were not immune to the belief in Obeah’s effectiveness. By the late eighteenth century, whites in the Caribbean linked the power of Obeah with African religious traditions; as a result, Obeah became a feature in pro- and anti-slavery discussions. On the one hand, metropolitan politicians and Caribbean planters had a vested interest in the success of the slave trade, argued that Africans were incapable of self-governance due to their inherent barbarous nature. On the other hand, anti-slavery advocates argued that Africans could be reformed and trusted both religiously and intellectually to be civilized freemen and women, in a sense, to be more like British citizens. In the period from 1780-1834, policing the boundaries of civility was crucial to the agendas of both pro- and anti-slavery advocates. Obeah, as an African-derived spiritual

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power, stood in opposition to white British conceptions of religion and intellect, and as a result required suppression and eradication.

### The Abolitionist Movement

Following the June 1783 abolition petition, which the House of Commons dismissed, smaller groups of the Religious Society of Friends composed anti-slave trade pamphlets and circulated them around Britain.\(^{234}\) With the help of Member of Parliament William Wilberforce, anti-slavery sentiments galvanized the public in the metropole and as Historian Christopher Leslie Brown stated, “The British public had declared, nearly in unison, that a pillar that long had sustained British wealth and power now must fall.”\(^{235}\)

From this point, the story of the abolition of slavery from 1780 to 1834 is best told in two distinct phases, since each phase had different goals and different generations of leaders. First, in efforts to satisfy the public concern over the brutality of the slave trade, planters in the Caribbean and British Members of Parliament pursued ameliorative measures. Amelioration was meant to improve the living and working conditions of the enslaved and make Caribbean plantation labour more humane.\(^{236}\) Both abolitionists and planters agreed that amelioration would be beneficial as it could increase estate productivity by maintaining the labour force through natural increase and thus, lifting the reliance on the

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\(^{235}\) Christopher Leslie Brown, Moral Capital, 1.

slave trade itself. In response, Caribbean legislatures passed new laws to ameliorate the material conditions of slavery and force slave-owners to provide slaves with sufficient food, shelter, and clothing. Scottish Anglican Priest James Ramsay was a leading abolitionist during this period and his work focused on achieving the abolition of the slave trade. Further; he argued for the intellectual and religious instruction of slaves to improve their mental conditions and not just amelioration of the material conditions. Given the influence of religious MPs and imperial push to raise enslaved women’s reproductive capacities, ameliorative laws promoted religious instruction and shorter labouring hours for pregnant women. These laws also exempted women who had successfully birthed a set number of children from hard labour. In 1807, William Wilberforce and anti-slavery advocates won their fight to formally ban the British Empire’s role in the African slave trade, after multiple attempts failed to pass.

The second phase is concerned with anti-slavery campaigns perpetrated by the advocates who sought the complete abolition of slavery in the British empire. The 1807 Act prohibited the capture and sale of slaves in the British Empire; however Afro-Creoles could be held and born into slavery legally. Anti-slavery advocates continued working towards full abolition, and in 1823 the Anti-Slavery Society (officially, “the Society for the Mitigation and Graduation Abolition of Slavery Through the British Dominions”) was

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238 Ramsay, v.xvii.
239 Mary Turner, 15.
240 Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. *A Bill (as Amended by the Commons) Intituled An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.* London, 1807; Newton, 88. It is important to note that despite this ban, slave trading continued illegally in the British Caribbean.
founded in Britain by William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. The Anti-Slavery Society campaigned on the ideology that slavery was inherently un-Christian and morally corrupt, and eventually, they were successful in forcing Parliament’s hand. In 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. This act did, however, err on the side of the plantocracy who purported that gradual abolition would be best suited for the British economy and in the best interest of the enslaved blacks. It therefore instituted the period of apprenticeship. With the abolition of chattel slavery to begin in August of 1834, the legislators wrote into the law that freed blacks would still be required to work without pay for their previous owners as apprentices for six years. Children under six and adults over sixty were exempted and immediately freed. This did not, however, stay in place until August of 1840 as planned, instead with a concerted black resistance backed by the abolitionist campaign, apprenticeship period was disbanded in August of 1838.241

Throughout the abolition campaigns, the prospect of freeing the enslaved populations raised concerns over what blacks would do once freed. Even before 1834, free black populations, those who purchased their freedom through manumission or accessed legal avenues to sue for freedom, increased throughout Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean, however still only 2% of the enslaved population was freed through these channels. With the minimal growth of the free black population, commenters raised questions about whether those of African descent had civil rights, and exactly what those

241 Brown, Reapers Garden, 234.
rights were. While the academic literature has looked at blackness and citizenship, post-emancipation economics, and the questioning of abolitionists motives, this chapter is concerned with how Obeah functioned within this context. In particular, what happened to Obeah (now a supernatural crime) when confronted with the destabilization of the institution of slavery and conversations over black spiritual traditions in the British Empire.

**Paternalism and African Spirituality**

White abolitionists generally viewed slavery as un-Christian, and slaveholders as inhumane and cruel. In their efforts to communicate their goals of abolition, they articulated an argument that slave owners were at fault for plantation brutality. Anti-slavery advocates also claimed that the conditions of slavery causes slaves to rebel. To counter these arguments, planter and pro-slavery advocates used paternalistic rhetoric to claim that Africans were too uncivilized, lacked reason, and were too dangerous to be emancipated. The practice of Obeah fell into both sides of this argument and came at the cost of infantilization and further marginalization.

White Britons often pointed to the polytheistic ‘primitive’ forms of African-derived religiosity and practices such as Obeah as reasons that Africans were unprepared for

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242 Newton, 58.
244 Thomas Atwood, *Observations on the True Methods of Treatment & Usage of the Negro Slaves : In the British West-India Islands. And a Refutation of the Gross Misrepresentations Calculated to Impose on the Nation on That Subject. Dedicated to Lord Penrhyn, by Thomas Atwood*. ECCO Database (London: Printed and sold by John Mott, 1789), 12.
political participation, citizenship, and self-governance. For many British people, concepts of religion were not only race making categories. As explored in chapter one, white colonists conflated Protestantism with freedom, and freedom with ‘whiteness’. Furthermore, conceptions of religion also helped draw the line between which people were ‘civilized’ and what groups were ‘primitive’. ‘Civilized’ people practiced (Christian) religion, whereas ‘primitive’ people practiced superstition and magic.\textsuperscript{245} When these lines were blurred, it was met with contempt and confusion, as demonstrated in October of 1786. A British newspaper published an extract of an account from Kingston, Jamaica where a white woman “who is a mistress of a genteel competency” was found to be practicing Obeah under the direction of a black woman. The account does not discuss the possible effects or harm done by the practice but instead focuses on the fact that a white woman had been the practitioner. The unknown author responded to the occurrence by exclaiming, “What pity such ignorance and abhorred superstition should extend their baneful influence over the minds of the fairer or the creation? Should this infatuated woman be ever again detected in a similar situation, she may be assured that her name will be given to the public without reserve, that she may experience the contempt and detestation such practices deserve.”\textsuperscript{246} Despite white overseers in the Caribbean at times seeking medical aid from Obeah practitioners, whites seeking supernatural consultation or practicing it themselves were considerably uncommon and frowned upon.\textsuperscript{247} This extract shows the disappointment and concern for a white person, who should be the exemplar of civility, degrading herself

\textsuperscript{246} “Kingston (Jamaica).” Boston Gazette. 1786. America’s Historical Newspapers.
by practicing the low superstitions of the ‘primitive’ Africans. Pro-slavery advocates used
the civil versus uncivil binary in their own paternalistic arguments as to why slavery was
beneficial for black people. Pro-slavery paternalism did not originate in the late eighteenth-
century but is evident in the first Slave Codes of Barbados.

The 1661 Barbadian Slave Code, *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of
Negroes*, was prefaced by stating the importance for a new set of laws to govern the slaves
who are a “heathenish, brutish and uncertain, dangerous kinde of people,” but also that they
require protection. The paternalistic rhetoric from 1661 changed from protection from cruel
slaveholders, to the 1688 Slave Code where the discourse asserted that slaves cannot be
governed and needed to be protected from themselves. The 1688 preface stated that given
the slaves’ barbarous and savage nature, it

renders them wholly unqualified to be governed by the Laws, customs and Practices
of our nation; it therefore becoming absolutely necessary, that such other
constitutions, laws and orders, should be in this island framed and enacted for the
good regulating or ordering of them, as may both restrain the disorders, rapines,
and inhumanities to which they are naturally prone and inclined. 248

As such, the enslaved must “be well provided for, and guarded from the cruelties and
intolerances of themselves, and or other ill-tempered people or owners.” 249 The
paternalistic notion that slavery could regulate the enslaved and save them from
themselves, compounded with existing European notions of Africans being inherently
uncivilized and ignorant, is found in pro-slavery advocates writings directly on Obeah.

249 Ibid.
British Chief Justice of the island of Dominica, Thomas Atwood, was a virulent supporter of slavery. Before his death in 1793 he had published two works which were disseminated widely. The first, *Observation of the True Methods of Treatment & Usage of Slaves in the British West-India Islands*, was a pro-slavery pamphlet directly opposing abolitionists’ claims that the conditions of slavery were destructive and cruel.\(^{250}\) His main argument centred on the idea that slaves were not treated inhumanely, but like cattle to a farmer, mistreating the subject would be of no benefit and instead would be destructive to his interests.\(^{251}\) His most notable work, *The History of the Island of Dominica*, was less direct about his pro-slavery stance; however, it included a lengthy discussion of Obeah in which much of his paternalism is present in writing and indirectly uses Obeah belief and practice to assert that enslaved peoples were uncivilized and incapable of rationality and thus, unfit for freedom.\(^{252}\) Atwood positioned his discussion of Obeah alongside details of the Africans’ apparent unsavoury behaviour and tendencies towards drunkenness, thievery, and idleness. Atwood called Obeah “very laughable” and “imaginary”, and in describing their practices and persuasion, cautioned the audience that they are “very dangerous on any plantations for although there is no credit to be given to the power of their pretended charms […].” Atwood regarded Obeahmen and women as dangerous due to their proficiency with

\(^{250}\) Atwood, *Observation of the True Methods of Treatment & Usage of Slaves in the British West-India Islands*, 1-2.
\(^{251}\) Ibid, 2-3.
poisons, but also because “strange as this circumstance must appear, it is actually no less true; and many instances have been known in the West Indies, of negroes who have been persuaded by these Obeah people, that they were possessed in his manner, till they have killed themselves in despair.” Atwood’s discussion of Obeah is consistent with his own and other pro-slavery perceptions of Africans as uncivilized. This discussion is unsurprising; as the history of Obeah has shown, its polytheistic nature and uncertain spiritual systems had long been marked as uncivilized and pretended by white observers. In the period of amelioration and abolition, Obeah fits neatly into both pro- and anti-slavery discourses focused on paternalistic discourses, as a tool in both ideological and moral battles. This rhetoric is more evident in discussions surrounding intellectual and religious instruction of Africans, and debates centred on the civility of Africans in colonial societies.

In response to these pro-slavery claims, abolitionists articulated a paternalistic stance which framed Obeah as a side effect of slavery from which they could be liberated. One particular point of concern for anti-slavery advocates was the effects Obeah had on the minds of the enslaved. Similar to Thomas Atwood’s assertion that Obeah could drive slaves to suicide, abolitionist paternalism echoed the same concern. The Associates of Dr. Bray were an anti-slavery philanthropic group founded by the English Clergyman, Thomas Bray, who sought to provide spiritual and intellectual instruction to blacks in the mid-eighteenth-century Atlantic world. The group chiefly believed that “superstition is the offspring of ignorance,” and that Obeah was a principle problem affecting the minds of the

enslaved. In one of the committees’ points asserting why Africans needed spiritual guidance, they cautioned against Obeah and “such delusions, which may so far affect their minds, as to occasion total neglect of their own preservation, and thereby make them guilty of the crime of self-murder.” Similarly, Irish abolitionist Richard Robert Madden was residing in Jamaica when he wrote *A Twelvemonths Residence in the West Indies*, and took a hard stance against the brutish planters in the British Caribbean. Writing just after emancipation came into effect in 1834, he recalled the concern over Obeah promoting suicide through mental delusions, and claimed “formerly, the influence of Obeah practitioners was very great over the negroes. Hundreds have died of the mere terror of being under the ban of Obeah.”

Abolitionists had used the prevalence of enslaved suicide and martyrdom as a political tool to highlight the material and mental conditions of slavery. For instance, Olaudah Equiano's 1789 narrative was used by other abolitionists to show that African suicide was a political condemnation of slavery. Equiano's writing constantly reminded the English reading public that Equiano himself prayed for death to “relieve me from all my pains,” and most enslaved Africans he encountered preferred “death to such a life of misery.”

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255 Ibid.
256 Richard Robert Madden, *A Twelvemonth’s Residence in the West Indies, during the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship; with Incidental Notices of the State of Society, Prospects, and Natural Resources of Jamaica and Other Islands*. Vol. 2. 2 vols. (London: J. Cochrane and co, 1835), 103.
258 Ibid.
Obeah seemed to fit seamlessly into this narrative, as anti-slavery authors wrote that superstitions such as Obeah deluded the uneducated minds of the enslaved and could result in suicide if believed that a powerful practitioner had afflicted them with illness. However, the influence of Obeah on enslaved minds could be rectified, not through continued servitude as pro-slavery advocates claimed, but through emancipation and instruction. This is important to abolitionists and anti-Obeah paternalism; that with education comes civility and with civility comes the slow eradication of Obeah, which would best serve the black population.  

Paternalism then, for either of its pro- or anti-slavery purposes, was destructive to Obeah practices and belief. These particular responses towards slavery suppressed Obeah belief by further discussing it as a condition which held the enslaved Africans back from becoming civilized freemen and women, instead of as an autonomous and intricate spiritual system. This was most certainly compounded by white European existing notions of Christian superiority over polytheistic barbarism; the abolitionists further show this in their efforts towards Christian conversion and formal education instruction, which at its core was also paternalistic.

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260 Great Britain. “Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council Appointed for the Consideration of All Matters Relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations: Submitting to His Majesty’s Consideration the Evidence and Information They Have Collected in Consequence of His Majesty’s Order in Council, Dated the 11th of February 1788, Concerning the Present State of the Trade to Africa, and Particularly the Trade in Slaves; and Concerning the Effects and Consequences of This Trade, as Well in Africa and the West Indies, as to the General Commerce of This Kingdom,” (London: House of Commons, 1789), 309, 221.
**Christian Instruction**

Abolitionists between 1780 and 1834 used paternalism and Christian conversion in the pro-emancipation arguments. They asserted that enslaved people could be civilized and join British society as free and educated citizens. Central to this was the idea of liberating enslaved Africans from their so-called ignorant fetishism, spirituality, and cultural practices, the very things which pro-slavery advocates used as evidence against their liberation. It is in this context that Obeah was suppressed as a symbol of dangerous, ignorant, and superstitious beliefs that prevented the goals of abolitionism. These goals tied educational and moral instruction into the push for formal Christian teaching and as a result, were often communicated as simply “knowledge” or “instruction.” The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade published their objectives in a newspaper in 1790 in regards to the enslaved in the Caribbean colonies and expressed that, “they are ignorant, but capable of instruction, and the Terrors of Superstitions will soon Vanish before the Means of Knowledge, if they are in place in the way of receiving them.”

The process of introducing religious instruction began with the reform of the Caribbean’s religious institutions. In particular, the reformation of the Church of England was central to the amelioration agenda under abolitionist MP Thomas Fowell Buxton towards the gradual extinction of slavery. The majority of the Anglican Clergy in the British Caribbean came from the planter class and thus had a vested interest in supporting planter’s rights to withhold Christian teachings from the enslaved peoples, and most often

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refused to allow missionaries preach to their slaves.\textsuperscript{262} Reform was therefore necessary, and despite enslaved baptism being legislated in Barbados in 1696, very few planters obliged and even fewer officials enforced it. So, by the 1820s, Anglican churches were racially segregated, some parishes outright refused to include slaves in Christian traditions, and as a result, Afro-Creole participation in these traditional rites was infrequent.\textsuperscript{263}

Motives for Anglican reform in the Caribbean largely stemmed from Missionary pressures building over decades. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Reverend Thomas Bray founded the \textit{Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts}. However, their efforts were focused primarily on the North American colonies and targeted Quakers and other “unchurched” Protestant groups rather than African slaves. After imperial policy shifts in the 1820s, missionary societies promoting education and Christianity began spreading across the Caribbean – largely in response from increased competition from non-conformist missionaries.\textsuperscript{264} In response to this external pressure, the Anglican Church formally established two dioceses, one in Barbados and one in Jamaica.\textsuperscript{265} With the Church of England’s new interest in proselytizing in the Caribbean, many more Afro-Creoles accessed the new channels because of the practical social and political benefits that Christian conversion offered, which presented pro- and anti-slavery advocates with a recurring political dilemma.

The lines concerning Christianity and freedom were still not clear cut. Pro- and anti-slavery advocates wavered over the effects of Christianity on the enslaved. While the

\textsuperscript{262} Newton, 88-89.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid, 90.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
laws had long established that Christian baptism did not equate freedom, the plantocracy and other Creole elites were uncomfortable with the possibility of too much instruction from missionaries. Planters feared that perhaps teaching the slaves formal Christian text and biblical traditions would teach them to read, write, and thus provide them with more autonomy in advocating for their own freedom through manumission, or joining anti-slavery advocacy. This, however, was an issue for imperial officials who urged Creole elites to support missionary work and legislative reforms in order to respond to abolitionists arguments that slavery was fundamentally incompatible with true Christianity.\(^{266}\) On the other side of the debate, steadfast abolitionists affirmed that enslaved Africans were in a state of ignorance spiritually and intellectually, but capable of improvement. Richard Robert Madden wrote that if whites failed to cure the ignorance in African slaves, they could never learn what is truly good or evil, and to do this “religious instruction is of the first importance; and where it is of a good kind, no other may be necessary for the regulation of moral conduct.” Furthermore, “the time is come when there is no advantage in their ignorance, and no prospect of prosperity except in their conduct as rational beings and capable of instruction, and, therefore qualified for freedom.”\(^{267}\)

However, the increased Christianization of Africans only helped to foster various African-derived syncretic sects referred to as “Native Baptists.” Despite religious officials trying to denounce the spread of “self-created instructors” who preached to their own racial communities, black Native Baptists grew more established and gained wide followings.\(^{268}\)

\(^{266}\) Ibid, 88.  
\(^{267}\) Madden, 143.  
\(^{268}\) Mary Turner, 57.
Native Baptists in Jamaica were referred to as an Afro-Christian sect and reflected significant religious, social, and cultural issues in enslaved people’s lives. This religious practice spread through Jamaica in the late eighteenth century by ex-American slaves George Liele and Moses Baker. Native Baptism became more attractive to slaves in Jamaica than the missionary religions of Moravians and Methodists who came in the early eighteenth century. Native Baptism was syncretic and incorporated Baptists teachings of hope and salvation with African religious systems. Slaves in Jamaica took to Native Baptism easily because they were capable of absorbing these teaching into their pre-existing African spiritual frameworks, such as Obeah.269 Due to the African-derived syncretic elements of Native Baptism, including speaking in tongues, and spirit possession, it led white officials to define the practice and refer to it informally as “Christianised Obeahs.”270

By the beginning of the abolitionist period in 1780, most whites had been familiar with Obeah as a social problem—especially after the role it played in Tacky’s War in 1760. Missionaries and anti-slavery advocates, whose goals were to suppress the ignorant superstitions of the black communities in the Caribbean, certainly viewed Obeah as a social, spiritual, and political issue that contested their goals. To combat Obeah practice and African ‘superstitions’, Baptist missionary Rev. W. Knibb told a parliamentary committee that they first needed to teach the slaves to think and act rationally. He further

270 Mary Turner, 58-59.
compared the ‘low’ superstitions of slaves in Jamaica to the problem that preachers in England faced with their poorer congregants and confirmed that it resided in the “ignorant mind.”\textsuperscript{271} William Duke, a member of the philanthropic group, The Associates of Doctor Bray, articulated similar sentiments. He promised to convert all the blacks of his parish in order to successfully, “Overthrow, if I can, some pernicious principles and tenants in our slaves, that make so much the Dupes of superstition.”\textsuperscript{272} Examples he outlined of these superstitions are the “negroes superstitious notions concerning their dead” and “All witchcraft, Obeah, conjurors, Oath or swearing upon Grave Dirt.”\textsuperscript{273}

Pro-slavery advocates, nevertheless, disagreed that Christianization could civilize the enslaved and wipeout Obeah superstitions. Instead, they used the slaves’ lack of adherence to Christian practices, morality, and continued practice of Obeah as evidence towards their inability to become free citizens. In John Poyer’s History of Barbados (1808), he took a hard stance against the proposition that slaves should be able to testify as witnesses against whites in Barbados; a suggestion put forward by ameliorative measures to reduce unchecked white violence against the enslaved. Poyer stated that “famine” and “pestilence” was only marginally worse than the thought of having tens of thousands of “heathen slaves” testify against their Christian masters. He continued to state that the Africans in Barbados are uncivilized by nature due in part to their Obeah belief,

They are pagans in the most extensive signification that opprobrious appellative. Without even the advantage of idolatry, they have no system of morality, no sense of religion, nor faith in its doctrines; their creed is witchcraft, and their only

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid, 59. This source is recorded from John Shipman’s Thoughts On Religion Amoung The Negros, as Evidence Put forth by Rev. W. Knibb, 807-810. Full text of this document has been unavailable, and thus this source was used in conjunction with Turner’s work.

\textsuperscript{272} Associates Of Dr. Bray, 10-12.

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.
religious rite the practice of Obeah. Travellers report, that the Africans are believers in the Supreme being; that they have modes of worship, and many religious ceremonies. But those who have been brought to Barbadoes seem to have left their national faith and household good behind; and, what is far more unfortunate, they have adopted no others in their stead. Some, indeed, profess Christianity, that is, they have been baptized, but their hearts are as void of any religious impressions as if they had continued in the wilds of Africa. Frequent attempts have been made by some humane owners to convert their favourite slaves to Christianity, and though many of them are treated with parental fondness and indulgence, no benefits have been derived from the pious endeavours to affect their conversion.274

Despite pro-slavery advocates’ discontent with missionaries ‘agitating’ racial tensions with Christian teachings, missionaries in the British Caribbean actively sought out slaves who practiced rival religious traditions as new church members, to little avail.275 Despite church membership growing, Obeah belief seemingly did not die down as congregations had to be reminded from the pulpit to disown their existing Obeah beliefs and not seek out Obeah consultations. Despite this warning, missionaries visiting estates frequently discovered preparations for “superstitious rites,” and enslaved peoples passing on stories of ancestral spirits and traditional African-derived religions to children.276 Suppressing Obeah in favour of Christian religiosity was difficult and meant that missionaries had to provide frequent and detailed instruction; however, they were ill-equipped for such a large job, being so consistently understaffed.277

By the 1820s the discourse surrounding Obeah and Christian conversion began to change, implying that the practice of Obeah was slowly falling out of style. One source

275 Matthews, 92; Mary Turner, 81.
276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
from 1823 details this sentiment by asserting that while Obeah has astonishing effects on the mind of the Africans, they can be “enlightened by instruction: many have been know, after a long course of instruction, still to cling to the fascinating mischief.”278 The author continued to argue that despite the Africans belief, “Christianity can alone subject this demon; and that it had done so in Delaval plantation, I have every reason to believe.”279 In another account, the anonymous author stated confidently about the prevalence of practitioners on the estates, “I am happy to say, I believe not one (Obeah practitioner). The genius of superstition fled before the pure flame of Christianity.”280

One year after emancipation (1835), Richard Robert Madden’s abolitionist work reflected sympathetically on Obeah practice, which he believed stemmed from the barbarity of slavery and plantocratic violence. Madden wrote, “They accuse them of practicing on white men’s lives - of poisoning their masters in the security of their own dwellings. That such perfidy did exist in former time, I believe, –nay, I know, from the lips of an old Obeah practiser, that it did exist […]”281 Madden’s writing on Obeah attempted to dispel the negative connotations attached to the practice. He asserted that Obeah was a product of the time, and while white overseers and masters had been killed, albeit less frequently than reported, that it was almost justified because,

279 Ibid, 179.
280 Ibid,177; This book is compiled from many accounts, anonymous author but details observations and experiences in the west indies and with enslaved Africans. While the political afflation’s are hard to discern, the work is written in favour of the sympathetic, paternalist view of enslavement akin to antislavery advocates.
281 Madden, 87.
it (Obeah) existed at a time when it was lawful to cut off a man’s foot for absenting himself from his master’s home,— to slit up his nose for harbouring a runaway,— to cut off his ears for stealing a goat,— and, for a capital offence, to stake him to the ground, and burn him at a slow fire, or hang him in chains, and prolong the agonies of expiring natural for a days together; barbarities which have been practise within half a century, and the details of which I have read with my own eyes […] 282

Madden constructed his discussion of Obeah related poisoning as comparable to the violence perpetrated by white slaveholders and overseers during slavery, and that, “the times were barbarous, and the negroes were not the only people whose savagery conformed to them.” 283

While Robert Richard Madden and other abolitionists and missionaries argued that Obeah had been diminishing through conversion, this was not the case. This opinion most certainly lent weight to the abolitionist agenda, that enslaved peoples could be cured of their superstitions and become Christian, similarly to respectable civilized whites. Despite this opinion, the Caribbean colonial legislatures took steps to suppress Obeah on a legal basis, following the Jamaican 1760 precedent.

‘Civility’ and Freedom

While Richard Robert Madden’s discourse on Obeah is a contemporary outlier in his neutral stance on Obeah and insistence that it was a sole product of the period of slavery, his work touches on discussions of freedom, citizenship, and criminality that emerge out of this period of abolition. The effects of abolition transcended the spiritual and moral

282 Ibid.
283 Ibid.
welfare of the enslaved and sought to regulate their civil behaviours, which was a critical step in suppressing Obeah practice in the face of emancipation. After the Jamaican 1760 anti-Obeah act, many British Caribbean islands held discussions about Obeah in the legislature, but there is a noticeable gap in these islands enacting their own laws.\textsuperscript{284} In particular, most Caribbean islands enacted their own laws following the 1791 Haitian Revolution. Whether these two events are directly related or not, it should be asserted that the events in Saint Domingue had profound effects on the British colonies, factoring into pro-versus anti-slavery debates concerning rebellion. It is possible that the role of Vodou Priest, Dutty Boukman, in the insurrection, reignited concerns over Obeah and rebellion in British controlled colonies.\textsuperscript{285} The Haitian Revolution also stalled the abolitionist goals and gave pro-slavery advocates ammunition in their assertions that slaves were dangerous. This stance was further supported by the growing number of Obeah crimes in Jamaica since 1760. Pro-slavery advocate Stephen Fuller, an agent of Jamaica recounted an incident of Obeah poisoning to the first parliamentary enquiry into the slave trade in 1789. He claimed that an enslaved butler in Vere poisoned the slaveholder’s water supply with a dead fowl, and upon further investigation of his slave quarters, a green substance, Obeah materials, and “green liquids in a bowl” were found. The butler was subsequently sentenced to transportation.\textsuperscript{286} Thus, Obeah practitioners facing trial for practices substantiated pro-

\textsuperscript{284} Handler and Bilby, \textit{Enacting Power}, 53, 69, 75, 85.
\textsuperscript{285} Matthews, 59, 180.
\textsuperscript{286} Great Britain, \textit{Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantation}, 224-225.
slavery claims that Obeah was dangerous and enslaved Africans were dangerous to the colonies, especially after the Haitian Revolution.

Following the Haitian Revolution, Trinidad and Tobago enacted their Anti-Obeah law in 1800, followed by Barbados in 1806, and Antigua in 1809. With the late enactment of these laws, a particular rhetoric is found which illustrates that Caribbean legislators were cognizant of the fact that abolition was on the horizon, and that Obeah was not a practice contained to enslavement. Historian Melanie Newton notes that when Barbados enacted their Obeah law in 1806, it specifically banned “slaves” from practicing. Under imperial pressure to revise their legislation, however, in 1818 the legislators changed the wording of the Obeah Act to proscribe all “persons” from practicing Obeah. This is similarly seen in the Grenada 1825 Obeah act which prohibits a “slave or person” from practicing Obeah. Removing the term “slave” or making the definition more ambiguous allows for both enslaved and free blacks to be tried for Obeah related offences in light of the contemporary push for abolition in the British colonies.

The modernization of Obeah’s proscription can also be seen in their proximity to vagrancy laws. In Britain, vagrancy ordinances were consistently in place since 1597 with the expressed purpose of arresting ‘disorderly’ civil behaviours viewed as a social ill. Vagrancy laws prohibited begging and unconventional forms of mobile labour, but also consistently prohibited a person from pretending to supernatural powers, an identical

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287 Enacting power, 53-85.
288 Newton, 89.
289 Ibid, 85-86.
discoursed reproduced in the Caribbean colonies in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{290} The British Vagrancy Act in 1824 specifically outlawed “every person pretending or professing to tell fortunes, or using any subtle craft, means, or device, by palmistry or otherwise, to deceived and impose on any of his majesty’s subjects.”\textsuperscript{291} While most Caribbean colonies borrowed or outright replicated each other’s Obeah laws, they each specifically prohibited the pretending of supernatural power and mention the purpose of “deluding” or defrauding another person, similar to British vagrancy laws.\textsuperscript{292} These laws functioned similarly as well, as very few individuals were tried under the 1736 Witchcraft Act for claiming to be a witch, while those found to be engaging in magical folk practitioners, fortune telling, and the emerging spiritualists were all tried under vagrancy laws.\textsuperscript{293} In the mid-1800’s Caribbean, there were also very few ways to distinguish the crime of practicing Obeah which featured divination practices, and typical vagrancy laws in England which outlawed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{291} Great Britain. An Act for the Punishment of Idle and Disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabonds in England, 5 Geo. 4 (1824).
\item \textsuperscript{292} Jamaica. An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves (1760); “State Papers, (Presented By Command of Hist Majesty) Relating to The King of Ava; The Infanta Regent of Portugal;The United States of America; The Emperor of Brazil; The British West India Colonies; and The Slave Population In The West Indies, On The Continent Of South America, And At The Cape of Good Hope,” (State Papers. London, 1827); Grenada. “Consolidated Slave Act,” 1825. TNA CO103/12. The National Archives, UK.
\item \textsuperscript{293} Boaz, “Fraud, vagrancy and the 'pretended' exercise of supernatural powers in England, South Africa and Jamaica,” 51.
\end{itemize}
palmistry and fortune-telling. The concern for these practices stemmed from the fear that vagrants and Obeah practitioners were defrauding the population and posed general threat to public morality.  

The perception of Obeah as fraudulent had been recorded at least since 1750, when Griffith Hughes wrote that he observed a practitioner being consulted to cure the pain of an enslaved woman, and the practitioner used sleight of hand and other tricks to convince her family he was pulling pins and broken glass from her body using Obeah powers. Hughes stated that when the practitioner asked for payment, the enslaved woman’s husband discovered his trick and demanded a refund. By 1790, fraudulence was woven into the definition of Obeah. Thomas Atwood first introduced Obeah by remarking, “These Obeah people are very artful in their way, and have a great ascendancy over the other negroes, whom they persuade that they are able to do many miracle by means of their art; and very often get good sums of money for their imaginary charms.” While the laws concerning Obeah as a vagrant and fraudulent practice carries paternalistic sentiments towards safeguarding the ‘weak minded’ blacks from their influence, this too came to an end. In the post-emancipation era, even consulting with an Obeah practitioner became a crime as colonial authority sought to erase Obeah from civil society. Expanding Obeah legislation throughout the Caribbean colonies and controlling their civil behaviours was a necessary  

294 Ibid, 62.
295 Hughes, 15.
296 Atwood, The History of the Island of Dominica, 296.
297 Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power, 105. There are no known cases of someone being brought up on charges for consultation before 1834, however after, there are plenty. See: Diana, Paton, Maarit Forde, Suzie Thomas, Helen McKee, and Jennifer Kain. “Caribbean Religious Trials.” UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2019. https://www.caribbeanreligioustrials.org.
adaptation to abolitionism. With the institution of slavery slowly crumbling, enslaved people would no longer be tied to plantations and thus, would make close observation of enslaved practices and religiosity more difficult. While abolitionists and planters argued whether the enslaved could be civil citizens and whether Christianity was key to this goal, Obeah laws sought to ensure it.

From 1780 to 1834, the British empire was experiencing a fundamental change in light of abolitionist discourse and sociopolitical action. Obeah too experienced the ripple effects of this transformation as both pro- and anti-slavery advocates exploited the practice to communicate their agendas, which in turn led to its further suppression. Obeah was chiefly a signifier of ‘African-ness,’ and the lack of understanding on behalf of whites conflated the practice to witchcraft and polytheism; all of which branded it as uncivilized. To Europeans, civility meant professing and practicing the Christian religion, while those who believed and practiced magic and superstition were initially demonic, then inherently uncivilized. This binary was an agreed notion for pro- and anti-slavery advocates. They disagreed on whether the Africans could overcome their heathenish nature and become free citizens capable of political participation and self-governance. This confrontation largely employed paternalism; for pro-slavery advocates, Obeah was proof that Africans needed the structure of slavery to govern them. For anti-slavery advocates, paternalism was used to argue that Obeah was a consequence of slavery but could be eradicated through spiritual and intellectual instruction. Regardless of abolitionists intentions, paternalism was
invaluable to the post-emancipation blacks, who fought for autonomy and equality in education and religion but were faced with continuous infantilization.\textsuperscript{298}

The ideology of civility and paternalism was in itself damaging to the perception of Obeah during the abolition period; however, the actions taken to suppress the practice directly also had lasting effects on African spirituality. Pro- and anti-slavery advocates discussing Obeah as a social, political, and spiritual problem, compounded with decades of reports of Obeah related poisoning, lead imperial officials and colonial legislators to address the practice in the wider British Caribbean following the Jamaican law in 1760. Reforming the Anglican Church to improve the missionary and conversion efforts in the Caribbean meant that local authorities and religious officials focused on using Christianity to replace African-derived spirituality, specifically Obeah. While some observations claim that these efforts were successful in suppressing Obeah in plantations, legislators in the British Caribbean took extra measures to ensure its eradication: criminalization. The Obeah laws of the nineteenth century did not just seek to prevent slaves from exercising spiritual action against the plantocracy in resistance to slavery but focused on the future and modernized legislation to prevent its spread into post-emancipation society. While the discourse around Obeah’s criminality focused on its fraudulent practices in divination or “fortune telling,” the actual cases brought before the Jamaica slave courts still represented Obeah as a potential danger. In Jamaica from 1760 until 1834, there are an estimated 111

Obeah trials brought before slave courts in various parishes; 35 of which were acquitted. The remaining 76 resulted in death, imprisonment, or transportation, for those failing to adhere to the colonial efforts to “civilize” enslavement.  

**Conclusion**

In chapter three, it was suggested that some white religious officials and British writers claimed that Obeah was successfully suppressed, and no longer evident on plantations. As later literature has exemplified, these observations were incorrect. Obeah has persisted long through the post-emancipation era despite continuous legislative and cultural suppression. White travellers, colonists, and authorities have continued writing about Obeah until the present day. Much of these writings build on stereotypes and discourses crafted throughout the period of slavery from 1650 to 1834. For instance, in 1888, English Historian James Anthony Froude recounted instances of the continued practice and fear of Obeah amongst people of African descent. Froude invited his audience to gawk at the absurdity of Afro-spirituality. He further asserted that if Africans were "left entirely to themselves, they would in a generation or two relapse into savages." These words underscore Froude's true intentions, to exemplify the need for continuing British colonial rule of the Caribbean.

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299 Paton, Forde, Thomas, McKee, and Jennifer Kain, “Caribbean Religious Trials.”
Obeah has endured more than two hundred and fifty years of continuous legal prosecution. In that time, the public perceptions of Obeah and African spirituality have been predominantly shaped by its suppression. It is for that reason that this thesis has sought to investigate the ways in which Obeah was suppressed during the period of Caribbean slavery. The analysis of this period considered the broader contextual factors that influenced Obeah's contentious history. For example, this thesis has considered that European ideas of how to respond to magical practitioners influenced the ways in which British colonists confronted Obeah. This type of investigation has been essential in tracing the developments of the English's concern for Obeah as a tool for insurrection after Tacky's War. In studying Obeah from the rise of Caribbean sugar planting in 1650 to the abolition of slavery in 1834, specific themes have arisen. This thesis has maintained that Obeah was suppressed in response to three dominant contextual factors; Christianity, rebellion, and abolition. These themes demanded African compliance with colonial and imperial goals centered on religious boundaries, subservience, and civility.

This study first examined Protestantism and supernatural beliefs from 1650 to 1740 to interrogate how the imposed racial boundaries of the Anglican church in Barbados and European supernatural skepticism both led to early anti-Obeah rhetoric which carried onwards for centuries. Specifically, English colonists and the plantocracy sought to exclude Africans from Protestantism in fear that Christianization would liberate them from slavery. Simultaneously, English writers and travellers to the Caribbean recounted their observations of enslaved African religious and spiritual practices, concluding that they

were disorganized and 'superstitious.' Early Barbadian Slave Codes then attacked African traditional ceremonies which typically facilitated communal gathering and Obeah practices, under the guise of plantation security. This exclusion from Christianity and discrediting of African religious systems cast the enslaved as the religious and spiritual 'others.' This perception was further enhanced by the skeptical European debates surrounding the realities of the supernatural world and the British decriminalization of Witchcraft in 1735. As a result of these intellectual developments, Obeah practices became conflated with other forms of 'pretended' folk and spiritual practices.

The association between Obeah and European forms of sorcery and witchcraft is most clearly seen in the period from 1740 to 1780. Chapter two investigated how the change in European epistemologies towards magical practitioing primed British colonial's reactions to Obeah in the Caribbean. This is evident in the Jamaican 1760 anti-Obeah act which proscribes 'pretending to supernatural power' and identifies the practice as 'Obeah or witchcraft.' Despite whites not believing in the supernatural efficacy of Obeah, the enslaved African belief system became more dangerous to the plantation system. The role of an Obeah practitioner in Tacky's War showed that Europeans did not have to believe in African spiritual power for it to be effective. Instead, Obeah belief within the enslaved community was a powerful tool for insurrection by facilitating political mobilization. This chapter further highlighted how Obeah elicited anxious responses from white colonists who were concerned about Obeah practitioner’s proficiency with herbalism and poisoning. As a result of Obeah's engagement with enslaved insurrection, British colonial officials sought to regain dominance over the plantation system. After Tacky's War and reports of Obeah-related poisoning, rebel slaves had shaken the confidence of white mastery in the colonies.
The surrounding British Caribbean colonies slowly followed Jamaican lead after 1760. British colonies like Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Berbice for instance enacted their anti-Obeah laws following the Haitian Revolution, which increased colonists fears of insurrection and African spirituality. The third and final chapter of this thesis centered on this period from 1780 to 1834 with abolition as the backdrop to Obeah's suppression. By 1780 the discourses surrounding Obeah had been informed by over a hundred years of ethnocentric and racist stereotypes. Obeah was believed by white colonists to be indicative of 'pagan' African superstitions. Pro- and anti-slavery advocates wielded Obeah as a weapon in their arguments about the future of the slave trade and slavery as a whole. Pro-slavery advocates asserted that slavery was justified and even beneficial to the enslaved, citing their 'uncivilized' and 'deluded' pagan beliefs in Obeah. Anti-slavery advocates however preached that Christianization and educational instruction would liberate them from their backwards beliefs. Both arguments, however, were paternalistic and only served to reinforce the image of African inferiority and white mastery. As emancipation of slavery seemed imminent, Obeah practices became discussed in the same rhetoric as vagrancy and akin to European fortune-tellers and healers. Colonial officials updated their anti-Obeah acts at the end of slavery and focused on Obeah as a 'pretended' and 'fraudulent' practice.

In sum, this thesis has sought to contribute to the cultural history of Obeah by placing the practice in three dominant and naturally oppressive sociopolitical contexts.

304 Ibid, 69.
305 Ibid, 122.
Over 184 years, Obeah was suppressed as an ignorant superstition, and it was wielded against Africans as justification for their subjugation by the British empire. In 1789 Pro-slavery advocate, Richard Fuller wrote *An Account of Obi* in which he attempted to warn his readers about the perseverance of Obeah practitioners. He pointedly stated, "We conclude, therefore, that this sect, like others in the world, has flourished under persecution." Fuller was correct. Despite the relentless cultural and legislative suppression, Obeah remained essential to the cultural history of the Caribbean, and more specifically, remains significant to people of African descent.
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