

1 The emergence of Caribbean spiritual politics

In 1760, in the wake of the events that we know as Tacky's Rebellion, the Assembly of Jamaica passed a comprehensive Act intended to ensure the security of slavery against rebellion. Tacky's Rebellion was the most substantial uprising by enslaved people of the eighteenth-century British-colonized Caribbean. The full title of the Act passed in its aftermath was 'An Act to remedy the evils arising from irregular assemblies of slaves, and to prevent their possessing arms and ammunition and going from place to place without tickets, and for preventing the practice of obeah, and to restrain overseers from leaving the estates under their care on certain days, and to oblige all free negroes, mulattoes or Indians, to register their names in the vestry books of the respective parishes of this Island, and to carry about them the certificate, and wear the badge of their freedom; and to prevent any captain, master or supercargo of any vessel bringing back slaves transported off this Island'.¹ The Act's emphasis on tickets, registration, and certification suggests a concern with monitoring space and people in order to be able to track and thus prevent insurrectionary activity. Such provisions were widespread in slave societies, and became increasingly so in the second half of the eighteenth century. Alongside these standard security provisions, though, was a relatively brief clause designed to 'prevent the practice of obeah'. By passing this clause, the Jamaica Assembly took a word that had hitherto been relatively rarely used, and gave it legal status and definition. It created a new crime that would eventually be prosecuted across the British colonies in the Caribbean, not just during the era of slavery but into the late twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. The Assembly's influential choice to make obeah into a crime departed from earlier responses to slave rebellions or Maroon anti-slavery activity in the Anglophone Caribbean, even where 'obeah' had been implicated in their organization. It also differed from the decisions of state authorities in other slave societies.

¹ The original Act is in CO 139/21.

What underlay the Assembly's decision, and what were its implications? The significance of the passage of the 'Act to remedy the evils arising from irregular assemblies of slaves' in 1760 has rarely been discussed, while the question of why, for most of the eighteenth century, no explicit legislation restricted the practices that came to be known as obeah, has not been raised. However, if we extend our view over time and across space, both the contingency and the significance of that decision in 1760 become clearer. This chapter attempts to understand the Jamaican decision to criminalize obeah by considering it in relation to earlier British colonial responses to the use of spiritual power by enslaved Africans, which did not make use of criminal law. It both charts and explains the narrowing, over the course of the eighteenth century, of the terms through which African spiritual power was interpreted. It argues that Jamaican legislators' decision to imbue an African-derived word with meaning in British imperial law must be understood in the context of several important factors, in particular the shift towards a state-organized legal framework for responding to enslaved insurgency and resistance, and the decriminalization of witchcraft in English law earlier in the eighteenth century.

The African captives trafficked in huge numbers to the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries brought with them a complex range of understandings of the powers that animated the spiritual world, their manifestations in the world of the living, and the relationship between these worlds. Spiritual powers, and the individuals who had specialist skill and knowledge to manipulate them, were specific, and named with many different words. While we can be sure that many of these terms, and the ideas they encoded, crossed the Atlantic, what is accessible to us now must surely be only a small selection of the words that circulated among Africans in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americas. African religious ideas were undergoing considerable development in this period, partly in response to the devastation caused by the Atlantic slave trade. We do know, though, that terms like *calundú* (*quilondo*), *ganga* (*nganga*), *wanga/ouanga*, *Vaudoux/Vodun/Vodou*, and *gris-gris* found their way from Central Africa, Dahomey, and Senegambia, respectively, to the Americas.²

Europeans who moved to the Americas also brought with them ideas and practices about the power of witches; about the healing powers of

² Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 144–59; Sweet, *Domingo Álvares*, 17–19; Pettinger, 'From Vaudoux to Voodoo'; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 163–5; Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs*, 16.

wise men and cunning folk; about God, saints, and the devil. Like African ideas, those of Europe were in flux in this period. Under the pressure of the extensive changes in European society in the wake of the reformation and as the process of 'Enlightenment' developed, the idea that humans might directly communicate with the devil, or might be able to access spiritual power to make changes for good in the world, became less respectable. Disbelief in witches and magic became a mark of intellectual credibility among the elite and the middle class. Nevertheless, for the majority of the population in much of Europe, magical explanations of misfortune and the ongoing presence of the dead in the world of the living remained important.

If, in the early eighteenth-century British-colonized Caribbean, the powers of the spiritual world and the practices designed to influence them were known by many names, both European and African in derivation, by the end of that century one term had become dominant: obeah. The term obeah had been defined in law in Jamaica and was spreading across the Caribbean; evidence about enslaved people's day-to-day religious practice also suggests its increasing importance as an everyday term. This rise to prominence of 'obeah' as a conceptual framework for making sense of Africans' and African Caribbeans' relationship to the spiritual world is the foundation of the rest of the story that this book seeks to tell, for the long-standing illegality of obeah both depended on and perpetuated it.

This chapter focuses more on how Europeans in the Caribbean interpreted African spiritual power than on African interpretations. This is partly a consequence of the available evidence: it is much easier to know how colonists interpreted African spiritual power than how enslaved people themselves understood that power. Precisely because they were not explicitly illegal until 1760, it is only occasionally that the healing and solidarity-building practices that came to be known as obeah are revealed in the sources that remain. The construction of obeah as a crime in 1760, and the subsequent laws that built on that illegality, brought African efforts to manipulate the spiritual world into view more systematically, and thus provide us with greater insight into how spiritual workers and those they sought to help understood their practice. However, this chapter does analyse moments of crisis such as the war between the Maroons and the British in early eighteenth-century Jamaica, and the planned rebellion in Antigua in 1736, as well as the reaction to them by colonial authorities. These events provide hints into the significance, for enslaved Africans, of obeah during its formative period.

Much of the historiography of obeah has prioritized the identification of the specific African origins of that term – a problem to which I will

return later in the chapter.³ In so doing, it has overlooked a point that is more surprising: that an African, rather than a European, term became dominant at all. This was not inevitable; indeed, it was not even frequent within the Americas. In many other locations European colonists described what Africans did to manipulate the spiritual world with words deriving from European languages, usually terms for witchcraft. Direct equivalents of the crime of obeah did not exist elsewhere. In Brazil, people accused of using African religious magic were usually taken before the Inquisition as *feiticeiros/as*. These, and the related *feitico*, are terms with their own interesting history, deriving from Portuguese interaction with Africans on the Atlantic coast, as William Pietz documents.⁴ In addition the term *calundú*, probably deriving from the Kimbundu word *quilundo*, came to be used for divination ceremonies involving the possession of human beings by spirits, but did not acquire legal status.⁵ In the Spanish colonies the Inquisition investigated people for *brujeria* and *hechiceria*.⁶ The actions that led to prosecutions for obeah in Britain's Caribbean colonies would most likely have been construed as poisoning in the French Caribbean and the British North American colonies.⁷

Some scholars state that 'obeah' was made illegal in the Danish West Indies before it was criminalized in the British colonies. Neville Hall writes that a clause of the Danish West Indian slave code promulgated by Governor Philip Gardelin in 1733 authorized flogging or death as a punishment for 'obeah'. Hall's claim is followed by Kwasi Konadu, who states that in the Danish colonies obeah was legally prohibited and punishable by death.⁸ Others state that the Gardelin slave code authorized flogging for witchcraft.⁹ In fact, the Gardelin code, which was published

³ See for example the works cited in notes 36–47 in this chapter.

⁴ Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish II'. Pietz shows that the term 'fetish' derived from the Portuguese *feitico* (charm/spell), which was linked to *feiticaria* (witchcraft). In the coastal African context *feitico* became *fetisso*, and then moved into Dutch as *Fetiche* and English as *fetish*. The Dutch and English terms lacked the sense of malevolence associated with the Portuguese.

⁵ Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 144–5; Sansi, 'Sorcery and Fetishism'; de Mello e Souza, *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross*.

⁶ Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 150; Maya Restrepo, "'Brujeria'"; Ortiz, *Brujas e inquisidores*.

⁷ On poison in the French colonies see Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs*; Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries*; Debbasch, 'Le crime d'empoisonnement'; Leti, 'L'empoisonnement'. For British North America see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 612–20; Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 92–113; Parish, *American Curiosity*, 274–9. For an important discussion of both witchcraft and poison across early North America see Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America*.

⁸ Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 58; Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*, 103.

⁹ Caron and Highfield, *The French Intervention*, 15; Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 22; Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies*, 167.

in Dutch and Danish, uses neither the term obeah nor an equivalent of witchcraft, but rather the word *tovernarye*, probably a misspelling of the Dutch *tovernarij*, meaning magic, which was spelled *tovernery* in eighteenth-century Dutch. It was *tovernery* by slaves, which the code describes as involving cloth bundles containing carved images, feathers, and nails which could do harm, that was made punishable by whipping. It also specifically prescribed poisoning of masters by slaves, punishable by ‘pinching’ with red-hot pincers and breaking on the wheel.¹⁰

Thus Britain’s Caribbean colonies, and specifically in the first instance Jamaica, were unique in their decision to give legal status to an African-derived term, rather than in interpreting African spiritual activity under the rubrics of poisoning, witchcraft, or magic. The ‘obeah’ that emerged in this environment shaped Jamaican culture and the culture of the Anglo-Creole Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In adopting and generalizing the term ‘obeah’ and translating it as ‘witchcraft’, British colonists in Jamaica made a consequential choice. This legal language assimilated a range of African practices to the early modern European crime of witchcraft, but also produced a conceptual space between them. Where colonists in most parts of the Americas assimilated African practices to European witchcraft, Jamaican authorities distanced the two. The new crime of obeah drew on the legal definition of witchcraft, but named it as something else.

The decision to criminalize obeah in Jamaica, and the fact that the crime then appeared in legal practice and cultural discourse in much of the Anglo-Creole Caribbean, had significant consequences both for the politics of slavery and for the understanding, interpretation, and framing of African-oriented religious practice after slavery. As later chapters will demonstrate, the fact that obeah had been constructed as a crime during slavery, rather than simply as an aspect of Caribbean religion or culture, meant that after slavery it formed a central means of stigmatizing, and often of continuing to criminalize, much of the religious practice of Caribbean working people. It is therefore important to ask how people in Jamaica and elsewhere in the British-colonized Caribbean came to live in a world where obeah was a crime, while people in other slave societies did not. Why were the roughly equivalent categories of *conjure* or *root work*

¹⁰ The Gardelin Slave code, 5 September 1733, English translation available online at <http://www.eurescl.eu/images/files/wp3/danishregulations/17330905.pdf>. This translation cites Rigsarkivet 390 Generaltoldkammeret, Vestindiske og guineiske sager, Vidsomsbog, 1733–83 [Danish National Archives. 390. The Chamber of Customs, West Indian and Guinean Cases, Book of Wisdom, 1733–83], 359–63 for a Danish version, 285–91 for a Dutch version. Thanks to Gunvor Simonsen for alerting me to this source and for sharing with me images of the Danish and Dutch originals.

in the United States and *quimbois* in Martinique and Guadeloupe, which were regarded by slave-holding elites in those places with suspicion and disapproval, not also made into central foci of criminal law?¹¹ Why, by the late period of slavery, were French colonials who encountered enslaved peoples' ritual practices so afraid of poison, while in Britain's Caribbean colonies slave-holders discussed poison with considerably less anxiety, but considered obeah a very serious social problem? Addressing these questions helps us to see obeah as a category with a history, something that came into being at a particular moment and under particular conditions. The rest of this chapter looks first at African and then European concepts of witchcraft, the spiritual world, and spiritual power, before examining how they came together in the Caribbean and were ultimately made into the crime of obeah.

Africans who arrived in the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries originated in societies in which the use of spiritual power played a significant role. They came from a range of cultural regions, which can broadly and schematically be divided into West-Central Africa (Kongo-Angola), the Bight of Biafra (predominantly Igbo), the Bight of Benin (Fon-Ewe-Yoruba), the Gold Coast (mainly Akan), Sierra Leone (Mende and Temne, among others), and Senegambia (Mande, Bambara, and Wolof, with a strong Muslim influence).¹² These societies differed in their religious practices and their understanding of the significance and working of spiritual power. For instance, people in the Gold Coast region and in Senegambia understood the soul to be divisible into two or more parts, which in Jamaica became the 'duppy' and the 'shadow'.¹³ In Sierra Leone, specialist knowledge was developed within organizations such as the Poro and Sande societies.¹⁴ In some regions, especially in Muslim West Africa and in Kongo-Angola, objects imbued with spiritual power, known as *minkisi* (sing. *nkisi*) in Kongo, played a significant role in mediating between the living and the dead. *Minkisi* were 'ritual object[s] invested with otherworldly power,

¹¹ On *conjure* see Fett, *Working Cures*, 84–108; Chireau, *Black Magic*; Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 120–45. On *quimbois* see Ebroin, *Quimbois, magie noire et sorcellerie aux Antilles*, 150–3.

¹² For broad descriptions of Atlantic African cultural regions in the era of the slave trade see Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities*; Morgan, 'Africa and the Atlantic', 229–31. On the difficulty, but also usefulness, of specifying regions within Atlantic Africa see MacGaffey, *Cultural Tradition*.

¹³ On the Gold Coast see McCaskie, *State and Society*, 167–8. On Senegambia see Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade*, 48–49. On both see Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 49 and 111–12.

¹⁴ Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

allowing [them] to affect special spiritual and material functions in the world'.¹⁵ The names of the spirits or deities in different cultures also differed in different places, and these varieties of names also travelled across the Atlantic, so that today we have, for instance, *lwa* in Haiti and *orisha/orisa* in Brazil, Cuba, and Trinidad, all terms that probably have Yoruba origins.¹⁶

Nevertheless, despite these specificities, many of which also became important in the Americas, there were significant commonalities that united early modern Atlantic African understandings of the relationship between the living and the dead. Africans universally understood the dead, in the form of ancestors and spirits, to have influence over the lives of living humans, and believed that the spiritual world could act on the physical world.¹⁷ Ancestors and spirits thus needed to be cared for and respected. There were also more distant gods alongside those that operated more intimately and locally, and were thus more easily contacted by human beings.

In all early modern African cultures people consulted ritual specialists whose knowledge of the spiritual world enabled them to help with problems affecting both bodily health and the health of a person's relationship to the world. Ritual specialists also advised political leaders, including through divination that revealed when times were auspicious for activities such as war, and administered oaths that created community and solidarity. Specialists could, with the appropriate knowledge, use spiritual means to protect, to heal, and to attack others. They often used 'medicines' – spiritually powerful substances that could, with appropriate treatment, act on the bodies and minds of humans. Protection against spiritual attack was a necessary aspect of daily life. Physical substances could have powerful effects, and these often depended on the ritual context in which they were consumed, touched, or simply placed in proximity to a person.¹⁸ African terms for such powerful substances were often translated into European languages as 'poison'. This was in

¹⁵ Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 110–12. See also the definition given by Wyatt MacGaffey: 'ritual complexes intended to bring about improvements in the well-being of individuals and groups, curing disease, identifying and punishing wrongdoers, averting misfortune, and favoring fertility and prosperity'. MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 12.

¹⁶ Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 19.

¹⁷ Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 236–53. Thornton emphasizes the compatibility of African and European approaches to the 'other world' inhabited in part by the dead.

¹⁸ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 95–7; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 104–6; Sweet, *Domingo Álvares*, 17–24; Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 48–9; McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths*, 44.

some ways an appropriate early modern translation, for early modern Europeans strongly associated poisoning with magic. It is one that can, however, cause confusion if it is assumed to refer to substances that provoke purely pharmacological reactions. It is also misleading in that African spiritual medicines were not only used to cause harm.¹⁹

Early modern African approaches to the spirit world tended to be holistic rather than focused on the ethical direction of spiritual work. They did not emphasize a fundamental division between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in the use of spiritual power, nor did they frame the importance of the dead in the lives of the living as the specifically negative ‘witchcraft’ of European societies. Rather, concern with the spirit world formed part of a pervasive cosmology that related to the whole of life. Spiritually powerful individuals such as *ngangas* or *okomfos* could be dangerous, precisely because of their power, but they were not inherently evil. Even the Akan *obayifo*, translated by early twentieth-century ethnographers as ‘witch’, was really, it has recently been argued, a more neutral term for one who makes use of spiritual power.²⁰ Indeed, it seems likely that concern specifically about witchcraft is in West Africa a phenomenon that dates from the era of the slave trade, and may well have been caused by it. According to Rosalind Shaw the earliest detailed written account of Sierra Leone, from the early sixteenth century, ‘makes no mention of witchcraft or techniques of witch-finding’, but does describe ‘divination for sickness, remedial sacrifice, and burial practice’.²¹ Similarly, one of the most detailed and closely observed accounts of West Africa in the era of the slave trade, Willem Bosman’s *New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, contains extensive discussion of religion and of spiritually induced harm and protection in the Gold Coast, but makes only one reference to an individual being a sorceress or witch (the Dutch word is *toverhoer*, literally whore who works magic).²² While the concept of witchcraft may have existed in these societies without leaving behind written documentation, the absence of such documentation suggests that witchcraft was of lesser concern than in early modern Europe and in later

¹⁹ Paton, ‘Witchcraft, Poison’, 246–8.

²⁰ Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*, 140; Blay, ‘Obeah’.

²¹ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 211–12. Shaw is discussing Valentim Fernandes’s 1506–10 *Description de la Côte Occidentale d’Afrique (Sénégal au Cap de Monte, Archipels)* (originally in Portuguese). See also Austen, ‘The Moral Economy of Witchcraft’; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 162–3.

²² Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 385. Bosman, a Dutch slave trader, lived at Elmina in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. For the Dutch see *Nauwkeurige beschryving van de Guinese Goud, Tand- en Slave-Kust* (Utrecht, 1704). Thanks to Jaap Wisse and Henrice Altink for help with Dutch. On Bosman see Pietz, ‘The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa’.

periods in African history.²³ Even so, there was clearly a strong sense in many West African societies that the world was a spiritually dangerous place, in which people could be harmed by the spiritual work of other people, and directly by spirits themselves. Thus while many West Africans who ended up enslaved in the Americas would have been familiar with the idea of the witch, the more important idea for them was that certain individuals could manipulate spiritual power for a range of purposes that were not directed in a single moral or ethical direction.²⁴

A concern with the problem of witchcraft seems to have been more widespread, at an earlier date, in West-Central Africa than in West Africa. Jan Vansina argues that the idea of witchcraft and the witch is a very long-standing part of Central African culture. The idea of witchcraft as human evil promoted an ethos of apparent equality, as the powerful were often suspected of using supernatural power, including witchcraft.²⁵ According to John Thornton, witches were an established presence in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kongo, where they were understood to do their evil work by eating their victims, symbolically and sometimes literally.²⁶ Witches were just one element in a wider landscape of spiritually powerful humans, ancestors, and spirits.²⁷

Thus, Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves shared a sense that harm could be done to people through spiritual or occult means, that physical substances (poisons) could be involved in such attacks, and that spiritual power could also protect and heal. For at least some Africans the slave trade was contributing to the formation of an increasingly threatening sense of the power of witchcraft and witches in the world around them. Nevertheless, they were embedded in a wider sense that the physical world was in constant relationship with a spiritual world, in which the power of the dead to intervene in the lives of the living, and the need to ensure that they did so in positive ways, was ever present.

Europeans also understood the visible, human world to exist in relation to an unseen world. For them the unseen world was more sharply divided in ethical orientation than it was for Africans. This was most obviously the case in the distinctions between God and the devil, heaven and hell. For some – Catholics – there were spiritual intermediaries, the saints. The focus on good and evil led to an emphasis on the possibility of an alliance between human beings and evil powers, and thus to the idea of the witch,

²³ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 212.

²⁴ For similar points see Bilby and Handler, 'Obeah'.

²⁵ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 96–8.

²⁶ Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony*, 42–4. ²⁷ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*.

who was characteristically female. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries anxiety about witchcraft in Europe led to the execution of thousands of individuals who were convicted of the crime, most of whom were female. As Lyndal Roper notes, the witch was imagined as the inverse of the young, fertile woman. Rather than providing nourishment to others, her body had become a source of danger: she produced poison in her breasts instead of milk.²⁸ This idea of the spiritually evil person was to be significant in framing European understandings of African spiritual work and ritual specialists in the Caribbean.

Prosecutions for witchcraft took place, albeit with greater or lesser intensity, throughout early modern Europe, including in all the countries that would become colonial powers in the Americas.²⁹ The establishment of the American colonies roughly coincided with the most intense period of witch hunting, from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. By the time the plantation system and the Atlantic slave trade boomed in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, large-scale European witch panics had ended. The belief that the physical, visible world was only one part of a wider cosmos remained, but the possibility of human action in relation to that other world was in retreat. Witchcraft trials declined in France, England, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands during the seventeenth century, and witchcraft was decriminalized across Europe between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, beginning with France in 1682. Brian Levack argues that the primary cause of decriminalization was the imposition by centralized state legal systems of limits on the prosecutorial activities of local judicial institutions; that is, that it was connected to the development of the absolutist state.³⁰ Central state authorities' concern about witchcraft trials was also stimulated by the increasing prominence of ways of thinking about science, religion, history, and politics that were less congruent with demonology.³¹ Despite this, for most Europeans witchcraft and magic remained real phenomena long after they were no longer crimes subject to prosecution. Cunning men and women, folk healers, spirits, and ghosts continued to be important parts of popular culture well into the nineteenth century, when they were reinvigorated by new mystical ideas such as spiritualism and theosophy.³²

²⁸ Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*, 209. See also Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 134.

²⁹ For an overview of the chronological and geographical distribution of European witch trials see Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 185–232.

³⁰ Levack, 'Decline and End'.

³¹ For important explorations of the complex issues at stake here see Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 683–6; Porter, 'Witchcraft and Magic', 193–218.

³² Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 171–4; Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*; Davies, *Popular Magic*; Oppenheim, *The Other World*; Dixon, *Divine Feminine*.

The Europeans who became slave-holding colonists in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caribbean thus drew on a shared Christian history in which witchcraft existed as part of a wider religious landscape. Coming from a range of social backgrounds, it is likely that their understanding of witchcraft varied widely. For some, including most of the elite, belief in witchcraft indicated the believer's failure to adapt to changing intellectual developments. For others it was a continuing live reality. The French Dominican priest Jean-Baptiste Labat is a good example of such an individual. Born in the 1660s, Labat lived through the period in which witchcraft was decriminalized, but maintained belief in the power of the supernatural. As Doris Garraway notes, his application of 'the discourse of colonial demonology to African practices of magic' indicates 'the persistence of colonial beliefs in the occult supernatural at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the European witch craze was undeniably in decline'.³³

There were, then, considerable similarities but also quite profound differences between European and African approaches to spiritual power, witchcraft, and the role of ritual specialists – the elements that would eventually fuse into the colonial creole idea of obeah. And yet it was not until well after Caribbean colonies became plantation societies that obeah became the dominant, and the legal, term for African spiritual power. The next section of the chapter investigates several occasions when practices and concepts referred to as obeah (or obey, obia, obi) were clearly significant for enslaved people, and were known to be so by slave-holders, but when these practices and concepts did not cohere or congeal into an object of knowledge thought to be characteristic of Africans. The chapter ends by exploring the events of Tacky's Rebellion and their aftermath. What had changed by 1760?³⁴

First, though, we should recognize that in order for the consolidation of obeah as an object of knowledge, produced through law and state power, to take place, it was necessary for the lexical item obeah to be available to people in the colonies. Where, then, did it come from, and why was it selected as the lexical term under which to criminalize African spiritual practice?

This is far from a new question. Indeed, it has been a matter of considerable interest to both popular and academic audiences since the

³³ Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 165.

³⁴ Elsewhere I have considered Tacky's Rebellion and its aftermath in the light of a comparison with contemporaneous events in Saint-Domingue, where Makandal's conspiracy, which made use of broadly similar spiritual medicines to those indicated by the term 'obeah', came to be understood by planters as 'poisoning' and also fed into the construction of Vodou as a religion. See Paton, 'Witchcraft, Poison'. This chapter includes some material that is reworked from that article.

eighteenth century. As the next chapter will explore in more detail, a prominent eighteenth-century speculative etymology argued that the term derived from the ancient Egyptian word *ob*, serpent. This explanation dominated in the nineteenth century and continued to have influence in the twentieth before eventually losing out to approaches that identified West African languages as sources of the word's etymological root.³⁵ Current scholarship is divided between proponents of two arguments. The first, a revision of the long-standing claim first made by the American Jesuit missionary and ethnologist Joseph J. Williams, who lived in Jamaica for several years in the 1920s and 1930s, is that obeah – as a term at least, and probably as practice too – derives from the Akan (Twi) word *obayifo*, traditionally translated as witch. The argument for an Akan etymology for the term obeah was promoted by Orlando Patterson, and has been recently updated by Kwasi Konadu.³⁶ Like his predecessors, Konadu argues that obeah is related to the Twi *obayifo*, but he claims that rather than directly deriving from that term, it actually comes from *bayi*, a term that he suggests has neutral rather than negative connotations, and means the neutral force used by the *obayifo*.³⁷ Other recent scholarship emphasizes the potential for the Akan *obayifo* to use *bayi* to

³⁵ The Egyptian etymology derived from Jacob Bryant's *A New System of Ancient Mythology* (1774). It was reproduced, sometimes with an additional connection to Hebrew, in abolitionist memoirs such as Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence*, II, 71; generalist periodicals such as *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* ('Sketches of Superstitions: Fetishes – Obeah', *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal*, 14 December 1839, 374–5) and *Notes and Queries* (Henry H. Breen, letter to *Notes and Queries* 80, 10 May 1851, 376); the popular writings of colonial officials such as Hesketh J. Bell (Bell, *Obeah*); accounts by people from the Caribbean such as the black Jamaican Anglican minister Thomas R. Banbury (Banbury, *Jamaica Superstitions*, 6); and the anonymous author of an article published in the Guyanese journal *Timehri* in 1919. From some of these sources it was reproduced in reviews and other popular newspaper articles. For instance reviews of Hesketh Bell's *Obeah* in the *Manchester Examiner*, 27 November 1889 and the *Daily Chronicle*, 28 December 1889 both reproduce it. (Both in CUL, Sir Henry Hesketh Bell Collection, Royal Commonwealth Society Library, GBR/0115/RCMS 36 (henceforth Bell Papers), 36/1, Scrapbooks 1889–99). See also 'The Cult of Obeah – A Curse to Jamaica', *Gleaner*, 9 April 1932. The etymological claim even found its way into scholarship in the United States, in the form of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Negro Church* (1903). None of these citations discussed the claim that Caribbean obeah derived from an Egyptian term in any detail; its use served primarily to demonstrate the authors' scholarly approach to the subject. Although this etymology was no longer taken seriously by most scholars by the early twentieth century, versions of it, clearly drawing on the account by Stephen Fuller, Edward Long and James Chisholme discussed in the next chapter (see pp. 55–6), still appear on esoteric and New Age websites such as <http://www.angelfire.com/electronic/awakening101/obeah2.html> and http://www.witch-lovespells.com/what_is_obeah.html, both accessed 14 February 2011.)

³⁶ Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 185–6.

³⁷ Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*, 140. For further elaboration of this argument see Konadu, *Indigenous Medicine*, 50–1.

bring good fortune as well as to harm.³⁸ Still others, however, define *bayi* as ‘witchcraft’.³⁹ Konadu bases his argument not just on phonological similarity, but also on the presence of the lexical item *obeah* in places where significant numbers of enslaved people came from the Gold Coast – most of the British colonies, as well as Suriname and the Danish Virgin Islands – and its absence from most of North America, where there were fewer enslaved people of Akan origin.⁴⁰

The attribution of Akan origin to the term *obeah* has long been contested, and is no longer the most widely accepted etymology. In the early twentieth century Harry Johnston argued that ‘*obeah*’ was ‘a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the north-east or east of the Niger delta, which simply means “Doctor”’, a derivation endorsed by Melville Herskovits in 1934.⁴¹ More recently, the case for an Igbo origin of the term has been strongly put forward by Douglas B. Chambers and taken up by Handler and Bilby. Handler and Bilby argue that the Akan *obayifo* was not likely to be the root of *obeah* because in its early usage *obeah* (or *obia*) did not have negative connotations, unlike *obayifo*. Instead, they claim, citing the Nigerian scholar John Anenechukwu Umeh along with Johnston and others, that the compound Igbo term *dibia*, meaning ‘master of knowledge and wisdom’, is a likely etymological source for Caribbean *obeah*.⁴² Captives from the Bight of Biafra, Chambers notes, were present in significant numbers – indeed, in larger numbers than were people of Akan origin – in all the places where the term *obeah* (or its cognates) is found in early sources.⁴³ Citing Handler and Bilby’s work, the 2004 *Oxford English Dictionary* amended its entry for *obeah*. The 1989 entry cited Efik and Twi origins for the term but the current edition, while stating that the term’s etymology is ‘uncertain’, gives the Igbo and Ibibio etymologies first.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, other etymologies also circulate. Alongside Igbo and Ibibio origins, the *OED* also proposes Edo *obi* (which it translates as ‘poison’)

³⁸ Blay, ‘Obeah’.

³⁹ Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, 412.

⁴⁰ Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*, 140. Handler and Bilby dispute Konadu’s etymological claims on the basis of personal communication from the Ghanaian musicologist J. H. Nketia, whom they cite as stating that both *bayi* and *obayifo* have strong negative connotations. Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, 111n115.

⁴¹ Johnston, *The Negro*, 253n. Melville Herskovits to Joseph John Williams, 18 January 1934, Herskovits Papers, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston Ill., Series 35/6, Box 26, Folder 9.

⁴² Handler and Bilby, ‘Early Use and Origin’, 91–2; Umeh, *After God is Dibia*.

⁴³ Chambers, ‘Ethnicity in the Diaspora’, 38; Chambers, ‘My Own Nation’, 88–90.

⁴⁴ ‘obeah, adj. and n.’, *OED Online*, June 2013, Oxford University Press. Available at www.oed.com/view/Entry/129542?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=JSyRzW& (accessed 20 June 2013).

and Efik *ubio* ('fetish').⁴⁵ Donald Hill states that the term is of Fon origin.⁴⁶ Others have suggested that the word may derive from Yoruba *obi* divination, in which coconut or cowrie shells are interpreted to determine responses to questions posed by the diviner.⁴⁷ As the multiplicity of possible original terms suggests, this controversy is unlikely to be definitively resolved. Perhaps it is most likely that in encounters between Akan speakers' discussions of *bayi* and *obayifos* on the one hand, and Igbo and Ibibio speakers' references to individuals as *dibia* on the other, both recognized similarities in meaning and sound of the others' words, leading to its emergence in Jamaican and in other creole languages as a single term. Nevertheless, Konadu's argument does fit with the clear identification of early prominent 'obey men' and 'obia men' with Akan names, origins, or associations. Examples include Quawcoo, the spiritual adviser to Court, the leader of the 1736 Antiguan conspiracy; Graman Quacy (or Kwasi), the spiritual healer of eighteenth-century Suriname; and the unnamed 'obiah man' who advised the Gold Coast-born Tacky in Jamaica in 1760.⁴⁸ Yet although many of the early individuals identified as obeah men were Akan, there are also eighteenth-century examples of people practising obeah who are identified as being of other African ethnicities. Among them are the 'woman of the Popo country', who will be discussed in the next chapter, and the less well-known 'Rock alias Venture', an 'elderly Negro man of the Papaw country' advertised in Jamaica in 1791 as a runaway who 'passes amongst the negroes for a great obeah man'.⁴⁹ At an early point, then, activity identified as 'obeah' was attributed to individuals with a range of African origins.

Moreover, discussions of origins do not tell the whole story. In particular, they omit the spread of the term 'obeah' across the colonies acquired by the British in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In places such as Trinidad, Grenada, and Dominica, where enslaved people came later, and fewer of them from the Gold Coast, legislation was also passed against obeah, and the term also came to be widespread in popular usage by the nineteenth century – although sometimes it competed more openly with other terms.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ibid. An online etymological dictionary also cites the Efik and Twi derivations. Douglas Harper, 'Obeah', Online Etymology Dictionary, available at www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=obeah, last consulted 20 June 2013.

⁴⁶ Hill, *Caribbean Folklore*, 21.

⁴⁷ Edmonds and Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History*, 233n231.

⁴⁸ Kwaku and Kwasi are both Akan day-names. Tacky's Rebellion was led by Akan-origin Africans.

⁴⁹ *Royal Gazette*, 22 January 1791.

⁵⁰ Direct arrivals from Africa to Dominica, Grenada, and Trinidad are revealed by this search of the Slave Voyages database: <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?>

Thus the term obeah and the many variants found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – obi, obey, oby, obia, ohea – reflect the mutual comprehensibility, for African captives from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra, and elsewhere, of a cultural perspective in which the dead could intervene in the lives of the living, and spiritual power was an important force for everyone. These terms existed alongside others for spiritual power, including *wanga*, *gris-gris*, *nganga* (ganga), *confou*, and *axe*, that were more prominent in other locations but which did not become part of a legal vocabulary. It was the prominence of obeah, both the term and the practice it connoted, in the Akan-led rebellion of 1760 that drew the attention of the Jamaican colonial authorities. For reasons that are hard to reconstruct, they used the spelling ‘obeah’ in their law of 1760. This law then came to stand for all kinds of uses of spiritual power in English eyes as well as those of enslaved Africans. The term was diffused around the other English and British colonies, and to Britain itself, as the British Empire in the Caribbean expanded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In addition to its widespread use in British colonies, the term *obeah* was also widely used in Suriname, where it remains current among today’s Maroons, although without the negative connotations it has in the Anglophone Caribbean.⁵¹ Accounts of the healer Graman Quacy in eighteenth-century Suriname show that at that time the term was used without negative implications, not only by Maroons but also in colonial society. John Gabriel Stedman described Quacy as a *locoman*, diviner, and sorcerer (rather than an obeah man) who made and sold ‘obias or amulets’ that made their wearers ‘invulnerable’.⁵² Quacy, who is depicted in Figure 1.1 in European fine clothing, acquired his freedom, and even became well off through his work. His powers were respected and used by both black and white people in Surinamese society. Bilby and Handler argue that the neutral meaning of obeah in Suriname, which was a British colony until 1677, suggests that the original meaning in Britain’s Caribbean colonies was also largely positive. They explain that the negative implications of the term obeah developed in the British world after Suriname was taken over by the Dutch, and thus did not affect that colony. In Suriname neither ‘obeah’ nor ‘obia’ became a term with a specific meaning in law;

yearFrom=1514&yearTo=1866&mjstimp=33800.34400.34500. Although it omits the significant importation of enslaved people from other colonies, this search gives some indication of origins.

⁵¹ Bilby and Handler, ‘Obeah’, 155.

⁵² Stedman, *Narrative*, 582. For discussion of Quacy see Price, ‘Kwasimukamba’s Gambit’; Davis, ‘Judges, Masters, Diviners’; Parish, ‘Diasporic African Sources’, 290–3; Watson, *Caribbean Culture*, 20–3.

instead, the religion winti, which was for a long time forbidden by law, was a closer equivalent.⁵³

The Surinamese experience may explain why obeah was not criminalized anywhere in the British colonies prior to 1760. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Suriname obeah was considered a useful force, even by planters and the colonial state, who used Graman Quacy's powers to counter the resistance and rebellion of enslaved people and Maroons. An analogous situation may have prevailed in the early English Caribbean, alongside a policy of, in Tim Watson's terms, 'accommodating, tolerating, and understanding. . . Jamaican culture and religion'.⁵⁴ Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, the perception that African spiritual power and knowledge could be controlled through such alliances shifted, especially as it was increasingly associated with anti-slavery solidarity. Increasing planter concern about obeah's potential for rebellion eventually culminated in the law of 1760.

Events that drew slave-holders' attention to obeah's potential as a force for resistance and for building solidarity took place in the 1730s, in Antigua and Jamaica. In Jamaica the planter class tried, and failed, to gain a military victory over what they termed the 'rebellious Negroes', that is, the well-established Maroon communities, the Leeward Maroons led by Cudjoe in central Jamaica and the Windward Maroons led by Nanny and Quao in the east of the island.⁵⁵ These communities traced their origins to the English conquest of Jamaica from Spain in 1655. Since then they had become well established, and formed a significant barrier to the continued expansion of the plantation system. In the 1730s, with the slave trade expanding and planter desire to bring new land into cultivation by enslaved people, the war between the British and the Maroons intensified. To their surprise, British troops were unable to gain a decisive victory over the Maroons, and instead the colonial government eventually came to terms with them, signing treaties in 1739 with first Cudjoe and then Quao.⁵⁶

As Barbara Kopytoff described in her classic article 'The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies', obeah men and women played significant roles among both the Leeward and Windward Maroons. Kopytoff argues that their political role was more significant among the more politically fragmented Windward Maroons.⁵⁷ The powerful spiritual work of the 'First Time' Maroons – those who fought the

⁵³ Van Wetering, 'Polyvocality and Constructions of Syncretism'; Handler and Bilby, 'Early Use and Origin', 98–9n26.

⁵⁴ Watson, *Caribbean Culture*, 18. ⁵⁵ Metcalf, *Royal Government*, chapter 2.

⁵⁶ Bilby, *True-Born Maroons*, 168–80, 260–88.

⁵⁷ Kopytoff, 'Early Political Development', 298–301.



Figure 1.1 Graman Quacy, as depicted by William Blake.
Source: John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname, from the year 1772 to 1777* (London, 1796). Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland

war against the British and won the treaties – remains an essential part of Maroon mythology and identity. Nanny's spiritual power is at the root of one of the foundational stories of Jamaican nationalism, especially since her elevation to the status of National Hero in 1977.⁵⁸ Contemporary written sources corroborate the presence of spiritual leaders known as Obia or Obea men or women during the 1730s. A Leeward Maroon woman captured by British troops after a skirmish in 1730 during which her husband was killed told her captors that her husband was 'one of the rebellious leaders and Chief Obia Man'.⁵⁹ After the treaties were signed, a retrospective account described the Maroons as 'very superstitious' and noted the significance to them of 'a person whom they called Obia Man whom they greatly revered'. The Maroons' Obia Man practised divination: 'his words carried the Force of an Oracle with them, being consulted on every occasion'. This observer also suggested that the 'Obia man' had lost prestige due to his failure to protect them during the final stages of the war: 'at present this Obia man is disregarded for having assured them this last town was inassailable by the Whites who in a few days after this report, convinced them of the Falseness of it, by burning their houses & bringing them to a submission'.⁶⁰ Philip Thicknesse, a British soldier who captained troops in the 1730s war against the Maroons, referred to the existence of both an 'Obea woman' and of 'Obea women' among the Windward Maroons, also on occasion using the spelling 'Obeah woman'. Thicknesse claimed that this woman (or women), who historians have usually assumed was Nanny, was a vigorous advocate of ongoing war against the British, who opposed the treaty of 1739, and supported dealing harshly with captured enemies. The Windward 'Obea women', Thicknesse claimed, wore the teeth of dead British soldiers as trophies, 'drilled thro' and worn as ankle and wrist bracelets'.⁶¹

The Maroons were also reported, according to the testimony of another captive, Sarra, to use sacred oaths to ensure loyalty among those who

⁵⁸ Bilby, *True-Born Maroons*, 38–40, 202–13; Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, 17–29. For popular attention to Nanny as obeah woman see Cousins, *Queen of the Mountain*; Gottlieb, 'The Mother of us All'.

⁵⁹ 'An Extract of Col. Campbell's letter concerning the examination of some rebellious negroes lately taken', CO 137/47, f. 91. A similar but not identical extract of Campbell's letter is found in Hunter to Newcastle, 23 January 1730/1, CO 137/53, f. 303, where Hunter's covering letter identifies the woman as a 'negro woman prisoner' brought in by 'a small party sent out from the leeward'. See also Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies, Volume 38: 1731 (1938), no. 25, pp. 14–31, which renders the word 'obia' as 'obra'. The original MS clearly reads 'obia'.

⁶⁰ I. Lewis to James Knight, 20 December 1743, British Library Add Ms 12431, f. 99.

⁶¹ Thicknesse, *Memoirs and Anecdotes*, 120–1, 126.

joined them: 'They give encouragement for all sorts of Negroes to joyn them, and oblige the men to be true to them by an oath which is held very sacred among the Negroes, and those who refuse to take that oath, whether they go to them of their own accord or are made Prisoners, are instantly put to Death.'⁶² Although Sarra did not use the term obeah or obia to refer to such oaths, his description anticipates accounts of oaths in other times and places that also constructed spiritual solidarity, and were often termed obeah oaths.⁶³

Spiritual protection, termed obeah (or Obia or Obea) thus emerges as a centrally important part of the Maroons' fighting strategy. Sarra's evidence also suggests that the Maroons' sense of collectivity was produced at least in part through religion. Despite this, the British who were fighting them paid relatively little attention to these elements. Obeah does not appear in any sustained way in colonial discussions of strategy, nor was there any effort at the time to restrict the use of obeah or spiritual power more generally among enslaved people. The colonial government's primary concern was with the difficulty of combating the Maroons in Jamaica's mountainous terrain, and with the possibility that their internal enemies might successfully ally with the Spanish. In this context, it is unsurprising that the Jamaican government did not legislate against obeah in the 1730s. Obeah was associated with the 'wild negroes', not those who remained on plantations. Such 'wild negroes' could only be fought by war or diplomacy, not through the courts or the law.

In the same period as the British–Maroon war in Jamaica, enslaved people on plantations in Antigua also seem to have been using spiritual power that they termed 'obeah', again without any legislative response. In late 1736 planters in Antigua came to suspect that a large-scale conspiracy was planned against them, led by a mixture of 'Cormantees' and Creoles. The uprising was planned to begin during a ball to celebrate the coronation of George II, which would be attended by the island's main planters, but plans for it were discovered before the ball began. The suspected ringleaders were quickly arrested and interrogated. A four-strong commission of planters was appointed to investigate; over the next nine weeks its members took evidence, heard confessions, ordered punishments and wrote a 'Report . . . upon the Weighty Affair of the late Conspiracy of our slaves'.⁶⁴ In the end forty-seven people were executed and forty-three banished from Antigua. Because the uprising was halted

⁶² 'The further examination of Sarra alias Ned taken by order of his Excellency', 1 October 1733, CO 137/54, f. 354. Another copy is at CO 137/21, f. 42.

⁶³ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 41, 67–68; Stewart, *Three Eyes*, 43.

⁶⁴ 'Report of our Proceedings upon the Weighty Affair of the late Conspiracy of our slaves', 30 December 1736, CO 9/10, ff. 97–114.

before it took place, it has never been clear how extensive the planning was. The major historians of the event, however, are convinced that it represented a genuine plan. The conspiracy – even if its extent was exaggerated in its repression – revealed a complex network of relationships between Akan-speaking enslaved people and those born in Antigua, many of whom are likely to have been of Akan parentage.⁶⁵

The conspiracy was organized through religious ceremonies and loyalty built through religious oaths, which were described in detail in the planters' report:

The manner of administering the oath was, by drinking a health in liquor, either rum or some other, with grave dirt, and sometime cocks blood, infused; and sometimes the person swearing, laid his hand on a live cock. The words were various, but the general tenor was, to stand by and to be true to each other, and to kill the whites, man, woman & child to assist in the execution of this, when called upon by the Chief, and to suffer death rather than discover; with damnation and confusion to those who should refuse, or having drank and sworn, should afterwards discover, sometimes too, the person swearing chew'd malageta pepper.⁶⁶

Here the report's authors drew on evidence taken at multiple trials to produce a composite picture of an oath which conspirators were said to have taken on multiple occasions and in 'no less than seven places'. Their main interest was in the content of the oath itself, rather than on who administered it. Nevertheless, the report went on to state that on one occasion where the oath was taken the leader and host Secundi 'had called to his assistance, a Negro Obiaman or Wizard who acted his part before a great number of slaves, assembled at Secundi's to take the oath, and assured them of success'.⁶⁷ The 'Obiaman' in question was Quawcoo, who was tried on 11 December 1736, when he was described as 'an Old Oby Man and Physition and Cormantee'. Quawcoo was one of three men to be described in the trials as an obeah man; the other two were Caesar, who belonged to the governor, and John Obiah.⁶⁸ Quamina, the main witness against Quawcoo, said that he had known Quawcoo in 'Cormantee Country' and declared himself to be 'afraid of this Obey Man' who was 'a Bloody fellow'. Quamina also described Quawcoo's administration of the blood oath:

Quawcoo put Obey made of Sheeps Skin upon the ground, upon and about the bottle of Rum, and the Chequeen upon the bottle. Then took the Cock cut open his Mouth and one of his Toes and so poured the Cocks blood Over

⁶⁵ Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels*, 227–54 and *passim*; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 120–4; Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*, 133–40.

⁶⁶ 'Report' CO 9/10, f. 106. ⁶⁷ *Ibid.* ⁶⁸ Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels*, 246.

all the Obey, and then Rub'd Secundi's forehead with the Cocks bloody Toe, then took the Bottle and poured some Rum upon the Obey, Drank a Dram and gave it to Secundi and made Secundi Swear not to Discover his name. Secundi pledged him and swore not to Discover his name to any body. Secundi then asked him when he must begin to Rise. Quawcoo took a string ty'd knots in it and told him not to be in a hurry for that he would give him notice when to Rise and all should go well and that as he tyed those knots so the Baccararas should become arrant fools and have their mouths stopped and their hands tyed that they should not Discover the Negro's Designs. He made believe that he would make the Bacarrarraras fools and that they would find nothing of it out.⁶⁹

This detailed account of oathing reveals a more complex role for the obeah man than the report's condensed version allows. Quawcoo conducted the oath as the report's composite description presents it, but was also involved in divination, using a knotted string in order to identify an auspicious time for the rising to take place, and also to exert spiritual control over the whites (the 'Baccararas' or 'Bacarrarraras'). Quamina's evidence suggests that Quawcoo was a significant person, although he does not appear in many other accounts of the events of the conspiracy. 'Obey' here describes a spiritually powerful object, made of sheep's skin, which the 'Obey man' (or 'Obia man') placed on the ground and sacrificed a cock and made a libation of rum over.

Quawcoo also participated at an earlier stage in the conspiracy, giving advice to the Akan leader Court and showing him the ceremonial material for the ritual dance. Quawcoo showed Court how they 'played with the Ikem, in his Country'. He also demonstrated how to fight with a wooden cutlass, and blew 'with an Oben ie an Elephant's tooth', and had a 'sheep skin on his thigh'. Konadu argues that these materials and the rituals revealed in the evidence demonstrate that what was taking place was an Antiguan version of the Akan *odwira* festival, which celebrated the New Year and recognized the power of the *ahene* (ruler).⁷⁰ Quawcoo's involvement clearly demonstrates that in his role as an 'obey man' he acted as both spiritual adviser and diviner.

Despite this detailed description of the use of an 'Obey' and the specialist who knows how to use it as an 'Obey man'/'Obiaman', white people in Antigua did not focus primarily on obeah in their response to the conspiracy. In its aftermath a number of security measures were taken, particularly focusing on limiting the ability of enslaved people to

⁶⁹ 'Tryal of Quawcoo an Old Oby Man and Physition and Cormantee belong to Mr Wm Hunt', 11 December 1736, in Minutes of Chief Governor and Council, St Johns, Antigua, 12 January 1737, CO 9/10. See also Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels*, 237.

⁷⁰ Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora*, 135–7.

congregate in towns.⁷¹ But control over enslaved people's religious practice or spiritual work was not seen as an essential part of the response to the conspiracy.

These events in both Antigua and Jamaica suggest a world in which rituals, objects, and specialists linked to immanent power had broad purposes but strong political resonances, and the term 'obia' was part of the lingua franca used by Africans and their descendants to designate many of these purposes and resonances. Compared to later constructions of obeah, whether as healing or as witchcraft, the early eighteenth-century meaning of obeah was much more expansive. It was far from the private, individualized encounter between specialist and client described by, among others, Orlando Patterson.⁷² Rather, the obeah practitioner was a person at the heart of the community whose knowledge contributed to critical political decisions such as when to rise against slavery.

Twenty-three years after the Antigua events there was another conspiracy, again led by enslaved Coromantees. This time the location was Jamaica, and the plan became an actual rebellion, the most threatening to the planter class in a British colony in the eighteenth century. Enslaved people successfully took power, albeit briefly, over significant parts of Jamaica. It took months for the plantocracy to fully regain control of the island. At Easter, 150 slaves under the leadership of a 'Coromantee' named Tacky attacked the fort at the town of Port Maria. They seized gunpowder and muskets, then marched southwards, gathering recruits as they went. Tacky's forces had connections with an island-wide network of rebels. Over the next few weeks uprisings took place in the parishes of Clarendon, St Elizabeth, St James, and Westmoreland, while a conspiracy was detected in the Kingston–Spanish Town area. Although British forces fairly quickly inflicted sufficient military damage on the rebels to prevent them overthrowing the island's rulers, they were unable to crush the rebellion completely. Rebel camps continued to exist for months, especially in Western Jamaica.⁷³

The Saint Mary rebels' solidarity derived at least in part from the leadership of a man later described by planters Stephen Fuller, James Chisholme, and Edward Long as 'the chief Instigator and Oracle of the Insurgents'. This man was said to have 'administered the Fetish or solemn

⁷¹ Lanaghan, *Antigua and the Antiguans*, I, 108.

⁷² Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, 188.

⁷³ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 148–9; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 125–39; Metcalf, *Royal Government*, 150–1. For a new approach to Tacky's Rebellion see Brown, 'Slave Revolt in Jamaica'. Maria Alessandra Bollettino argues that these events should be understood as a 'series of insurrections', rather than a unified Akan-led revolt. Bollettino, 'Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire', chapter 5, quotation on 191.

Oath to the Conspirators, and furnished them with a magical Preparation which was to render them invulnerable'.⁷⁴ Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica* used similar language. He described the man as 'a famous obeiah man or priest, much respected among his countrymen', and noted that the 'obeiah man' and 'others of his profession' had 'administered a powder' to the rebels which when 'rubbed on their bodies, was to make them invulnerable'. These priests also persuaded the rebels that Tacky was ritually protected and 'could not possibly be hurt by the white men'. Long argued that the arrest and execution of this man relatively soon after the start of the rebellion deterred some possible followers from joining the rebels. Nevertheless, he said, others continued to be persuaded of Tacky's invulnerability.⁷⁵

Tacky and his 'obeiah man' thus behaved similarly to Court and Quawcoo in Antigua, although with more success. In both contexts the leaders hoped to use spiritual power to promote solidarity and thus to mobilize a collective military campaign. Although the accounts of the specific ritual activities undertaken by Tacky's obeah man are less detailed than the evidence of Quawcoo's actions, it seems likely that in Jamaica too the rituals drew on Akan ideas and practices.

Despite the similarities between the role of obeah in Antigua in 1736 and Jamaica in 1760, the response of the Jamaican authorities in 1760 was significantly different to that of their predecessors. The Antiguan authorities had focused on restricting enslaved people from congregating. In the 1730s the Jamaicans had had to be satisfied with making treaties with the Maroons. In recognizing them as a sovereign polity, albeit one with obligations to the British Crown, the Jamaican government made no attempt to intervene in Maroon religious life. The planter class in 1760 was in a different situation. Like the planters of Antigua, Jamaican planters were concerned with questions about absenteeism, the ability of slaves to move around, and the need for a strong militia. For the first time, however, they also focused on obeah itself as a problem. As Fuller, Chisholme, and Long reported, 'the Examinations which were taken' after the rebellion 'opened the Eyes of the Public to the very dangerous Tendency of the Obeah Practices, and gave birth to the Law which was then enacted for their Suppression and Punishment'.⁷⁶ In the wake of Tacky's Rebellion, the Jamaican House of Assembly passed a law that attempted to prevent future rebellions.⁷⁷ Like the Antiguan

⁷⁴ 'Copies of certain of the evidence submitted to the committee of Council for Trade and Plantations in the course of their enquiry into the state of the African slave trade', 1788, BT 6/10.

⁷⁵ Long, *The History of Jamaica*, II, 451–2. ⁷⁶ 'Copies of certain of the evidence.'

⁷⁷ 'An Act to remedy the evils arising from irregular assemblies of slaves . . .', CO 139/21.

response to the 1736 conspiracy, this Act sought to secure slave society by restricting assemblies of slaves, ‘free negroes, mulattoes or Indians’, and the possession of arms by slaves. But in addition, it prohibited obeah.

The 1760 Act’s anti-obeah clause drew on the concept of witchcraft in English law and Christian religion. It prohibited the practice of what it termed ‘Obeah or Witchcraft’, making conviction punishable by death or transportation off the island. This phrasing is ambivalent about whether ‘witchcraft’ is intended as an explanatory term, a kind of translation or gloss – ‘obeah, that is, witchcraft’ – or as an alternative to obeah, an additional thing that was prohibited. In the long term the former meaning predominated, and obeah came to be defined increasingly as a form of witchcraft. The Act described obeah as ‘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’. It thus drew on elite European ideas of the witch, in which communication with, and more specifically the making of pacts with, the devil was a constituent part of the phenomenon of witchcraft. At the same time, it creolized this concept by suggesting the possibility of communicating with ‘other evil spirits’. The act also included a long list of materials – ‘Blood, Feathers, Parrots Beaks, Dogs Teeth, Alligators Teeth, Broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-shells’ – that might be used in the practice of ‘Obeah or Witchcraft’. This suggests that the legislators were also engaging with the material details of Jamaican ritual practice.⁷⁸

The choice to name obeah as a crime in 1760, rather than to subsume it within a larger concept of witchcraft, was partly determined by the fact that witchcraft in England had been decriminalized by the time of Tacky’s Rebellion. In 1736 the English parliament passed a new Witchcraft Act, which repealed the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Witchcraft Acts that had previously governed the legal approach to the crime. The new Witchcraft Act represented a transformation in elite understandings of witchcraft. As well as decriminalizing witchcraft, it created a new crime: to ‘pretend to exercise or use any kind of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjunction’.⁷⁹ Under the Witchcraft Act it also became an offence to accuse someone of practising witchcraft.⁸⁰ This new Act represented an attempt to generalize the idea that witchcraft was not possible – a view that had become widespread among the elite – to the wider population. Its main purpose was to suppress popular belief in witchcraft.

⁷⁸ For further discussion of this Act see Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, 46; Anderson, ‘Gnostic Obia’, 114–16.

⁷⁹ Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, 2.

⁸⁰ Bostridge, ‘Witchcraft Repealed’; Bostridge, *Witchcraft*; Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*.

Jamaican legislators thus could not resurrect older legislation against witchcraft. They probably would not have wanted to even if they could have done so, since many of them regarded themselves as men of the Enlightenment and were engaged with Atlantic debates about science and reason. And yet the 1736 Witchcraft Act, which set out the relatively minimal penalty of a year's imprisonment for 'pretending to exercise or use any kind of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, or Conjuraction', would not have helped authorities to combat the kind of use of spiritual power seen in Tacky's Rebellion.⁸¹ The obeah law bore traces of scepticism and anti-supernaturalism: it prohibited 'pretending' to communicate with the devil and 'pretending' to have supernatural power, rather than actually doing those things. It also emphasized the problems caused by 'deluding' others into believing in their power. But Jamaican legislators did not consider creating a crime of accusing someone of practising obeah. Whereas the main purpose of the English Act was to suppress belief in witchcraft, the makers of Jamaican anti-obeah legislation were far more concerned with suppressing obeah itself – even while they purported not to believe in its power. Their concern may indicate that at least some of the legislators – and perhaps even more of their constituents – were actually less secure in their conviction that obeah did not really work than they acknowledged. But whether or not they were convinced that Africans were able to muster supernatural power against them, they had just seen the very real consequences of the solidarity that obeah practice could promote, in the form of the rebellion. As Vincent Brown suggests, the new legislation was a response to the fact that 'Jamaican masters could not abide sources of authority they did not wholly control'.⁸² In making a law against obeah, the Jamaican legislators gave slave-holders the ability to prosecute – and thus rid themselves of – enslaved people whose use of spiritual power was *not* in itself directly related to rebellion, as well as those whose use of obeah was specifically directed at mobilizing resistance. In practice, as Chapter 3 shows, the new power to prosecute would be used primarily in response to rebellion and to the use of obeah in conflict between slaves; but the law had wider potential. The ability to prosecute enslaved people for obeah allowed for the possibility of combating the power and authority of African spiritual leaders that was not at present being used for rebellious purposes, but might eventually come to be used for rebellion. By bringing obeah under the purview of criminal law, Jamaican legislators attempted to individualize and domesticate what was in the context of Tacky's Rebellion a collective practice. In the challenging circumstances faced by slave-holders in the aftermath

⁸¹ Levack, *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 171–2.

⁸² Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 149.

of Tacky's Rebellion, even apparently non-confrontational uses of obeah seemed to present a threat.

We return then, to the question: what had changed since the 1730s? Although it is hard to definitively answer that question, the difference may ultimately come down to the greater legislative response in general of the second half of the eighteenth century, which in turn was a sign of a commitment to manage slavery through everyday state measures, as well as extraordinary violence. In Antigua, despite the recommendations of the report, no law was made in response to it. By the 1760s new slave codes were becoming a standard part of the management of slavery in the Caribbean. And therefore, in response to a major rebellion in which spiritual power, named in this case as obeah, played a prominent role, legislators outlawed obeah. In doing so they created a crime that would spread across the Anglophone Caribbean, and that would outlast both slavery and colonial rule.