

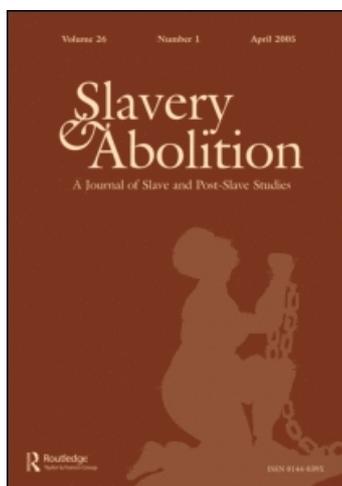
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## On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean

JEROME S. HANDLER and KENNETH M. BILBY

The medicinal complex of Barbadian (and other Caribbean slaves) fundamentally rested on African beliefs and practices in which the supernatural played a major role. What was called Obeah formed part of this medicinal complex even though Europeans who wrote about Obeah often confused and misunderstood many of its features. For whites, 'Obeah' became a catch-all term for a range of supernatural-related ideas and behaviours that were not of European origin and which they heavily criticized and condemned. The supernatural force (or forces) which the Obeah practitioner attempted to control or guide was essentially neutral. However, for the enslaved in Barbados (as elsewhere in the British Caribbean) the force, as accessed by the practitioner, was largely directed toward what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals such as healing, locating missing property, and protection against illness and other kinds of misfortune; it could even be directed against slave masters, which, from the perspective of the slave community, was a beneficial goal. Although Obeah could also have negative or antisocial dimensions in the form of witchcraft or sorcery, the entirely negative view of Obeah that whites largely promulgated during the period of slavery (probably exacerbated by the fact that it was sometimes directed against them), and that has endured until the present, has distorted the social role that Obeah played in the lives of many enslaved persons, whether of African or New World birth.

Slave medicine, including the practices associated with Obeah and the meaning of the term itself, changed over the two centuries of plantation slavery in Barbados. The array of beliefs and practices that Europeans came to include under the rubric of 'Obeah' in the earlier slave period, around the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, involved a variety of

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different, albeit broadly related, beliefs and practices ultimately deriving from a number of West African ethnolinguistic groups and socio-religious traditions.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, as fewer Africans were transported to Barbados and as an Afro-creole culture developed on the island, what was called Obeah evolved into a loosely defined complex involving supernatural practices largely related to healing and protection. One of the authors, Handler, has discussed the role of the Obeah practitioner (and other healers who did not involve or access supernatural forces in their curing activities), as well as the medical system of Barbadian slaves and its relation to Obeah, at length elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The other author, Bilby, has written in detail about the functioning of Obeah and the history of the term and its usage in the Anglophone Caribbean, drawing on ethnographic and historical materials from both non-Maroons in Jamaica and Maroon groups in Jamaica, French Guiana, and Suriname.<sup>3</sup> In this article, we consider the *term* 'Obeah' (as contrasted to the beliefs and practices often associated with it) *as a lexical item*, and offer some hypotheses for its origin and diffusion in the Anglophone Caribbean.

How and where the term 'Obeah' (with its variant spellings) first came into use in the Anglophone Caribbean is unknown. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing the Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica, gives 1760 as its earliest attribution. Obeah practitioners were implicated as leaders in a 1760 Jamaican slave rebellion, and in that year the Jamaican Assembly passed an act making the 'practice of Obeah or Witchcraft' a major felony.<sup>4</sup> However, the term has greater antiquity elsewhere in the West Indies, and by the 1720s and 1730s it was well established in the lexicon of Barbadian English. For example, in 1729 the Anglican rector of Christ Church parish, referring to the 'bad practices' of Barbadian slaves, mentioned 'their Oby Negroes, or conjurers', and Griffith Hughes, the rector of St Lucy parish during the late 1730s and 1740s, referred to the slaves' 'Obeah Negroes ... [as] a sort of physicians and conjurers', or 'Obeah Doctors'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the earliest unambiguous reference to Obeah in the British Caribbean of which we are aware also occurs in a Barbados source. Obeah is mentioned in several letters written from Barbados between November 1710 and September 1712 by Thomas Walduck, an English army officer stationed on the island, to a correspondent in London.<sup>6</sup> Walduck writes that 'one Negro can bewitch another (Obia as they call it)' and 'that one (Obia) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our country folk doe in England'; 'I have knowne', he also writes, 'upon Negros complaining that they are bewitched, an Obia Negro hath taken out of their eyes bones, shells out of their thighs.' The context of these references to 'Obia' suggests the term was commonly employed in Barbados at the time – or at least not used in a novel or unusual way.

Thus the term 'Obeah' was clearly being employed in the British Caribbean from at least the first decade of the eighteenth century, and probably earlier.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in the modern era the term also seems to be confined to the Anglophone Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> In Francophone and other language areas of the Caribbean other terms are used for folk healers who access supernatural forces in their healing activities.<sup>9</sup> Apparently this restricted linguistic distribution also occurred during the slave period, that is, the term 'Obeah' was not employed – or only very minimally employed – outside the British Caribbean. Although it appears in the Chesapeake and Carolina low country during the eighteenth century, it was more rarely employed than in the British West Indies and it seems not to have been a conventional linguistic feature in the British North American colonies.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a sampling of standard secondary works on North American slavery shows that the term 'Obeah' is usually not mentioned nor even indexed; if mentioned, the referent is the Caribbean (almost invariably Jamaica) – for comparative purposes – not North America. In short, as a term, 'Obeah' seems to have been absent from the vocabulary of the ante-bellum USA where the term conjurer (or hoodoo) was more apt to be used for a healer with supernatural powers.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the term 'Obeah' only appears in English-speaking America but minimally in the British North American colonies and almost entirely in the Caribbean, where it also occurs earlier than on the mainland,<sup>12</sup> suggests that the term's earliest use in the New World was in the British Caribbean. Perhaps this early adoption took place in Barbados, where present evidence indicates the term was most commonly employed at the earliest date, or another of England's early Caribbean colonies (see note 25).

Wherever the term was first used in the Caribbean, linguists and other scholars agree that the term itself ultimately derives from some African language or languages. Cassidy and Le Page tentatively note that the derivation of 'Obeah' is 'probably multiple', and give words, with malevolent meanings, in Efik and Twi as possible sources. A Twi (Gold Coast) origin, with its implication of witchcraft/sorcery, is more commonly given, and this etymology, with its negative implication, is often accepted, albeit uncritically, by scholars who rely on secondary sources in the British Caribbean literature for their information.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as Richard Allsopp has recently noted in his *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, 'no precise origin [for the term] has been determined, but some items esp[ecially] in W[est] Afr[ican] lang[uages] suggest a connection.' Deriving his information from English dictionaries of several African languages/language groups, he gives words in Twi, Efik, Igbo, and Ibibio that refer in one form or another to evil magic or sorcery/witchcraft although the term means 'practitioner, herbalist' in Ibibio.<sup>14</sup>

With the exception of the Ibibio word, virtually every discussion of the etymology of 'Obeah' traces it to a root with socially negative or malevolent meanings. In an earlier study, Bilby offered a very different perspective of the etymology of the term and the variety of meanings attributed to it. Although agreeing that the term derives from an African language, Bilby rejected most conventional interpretations and made a case that there is simply insufficient historical or linguistic evidence for assigning an original meaning in which 'we can have reasonable confidence'. More significantly, Bilby argued that the meanings often attributed to 'Obeah' derive from assumptions in the primary written sources that it is 'essentially malevolent witchcraft; [thus] it is not surprising that etymologists looking for parallel words in African languages have focused their search on terms that are usually translated into English as "witchcraft," "sorcery," and the like.' But, Bilby's argument continued, 'what if the search had started from a different initial assumption?' Since etymologists have started with the assumption 'that Obeah denotes evil sorcery', they 'have predictably succeeded in finding words in a number of African languages that are phonologically somewhat similar to 'Obeah' and have meanings related to witchcraft or sorcery'. However, if etymologists were to view Obeah 'to begin with as a kind of neutral or positive spiritual force', then etymological discussions might go in another direction and find the roots of 'Obeah' in other linguistic contexts and languages.<sup>15</sup>

Following this line of reasoning, a good example of a possible African source language in which a term similar to 'Obeah' has positive or morally neutral meanings is Igbo, spoken in the Niger Delta/Bight of Biafra. (Although we focus in this article on Igbo, similar parallels might be found in any of a number of related languages in the same general area.) First, it is important to stress the historical evidence from Barbados. When Walduck remarked on Obeah in Barbados during the early eighteenth century, he also observed that 'no Negro that was born in Barbados can doe anything of this, only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros.' It is highly likely, if not certain, that Walduck is referring to Calabar (i.e., 'Calabari' or 'Calabali') or the Kalabari of the Niger Delta/Bight of Biafra, although it is unclear if his referent is New or Old Calabar, both early British slaving ports, or the Niger Delta in general. In any case, many peoples shipped from Niger Delta/Bight of Biafra ports were Igbo or Igbo-speakers.<sup>16</sup> This shipment pattern *might* suggest that Igbo or Igbo-speakers influenced the presence and adoption of the *term* in early Barbados (as well as having been *among* the ethnic groups who influenced some of the beliefs and practices associated with it). As noted above, the term 'Obeah' can mean 'practitioner, herbalist' in Ibibio, and early in the

twentieth century Harry Johnston observed that 'Obia ... seems to be a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the northeast or east of the Niger delta, which simply means "Doctor." The system embodied in that word ... is ... in its healing formulae, largely empirical.'<sup>17</sup> In the Igbo language the word mentioned by Johnston (*obia*) occurs most often as part of a compound term, *dibia*, which is a contraction of two words, *di* and *abia* (see below). The fact that this root form, *obia* or *abia*, is not readily recognizable to non-speakers of the language when it occurs in this common contraction may help to explain why so few etymological searches have taken note of it.

Douglas Chambers also provides evidence that may strengthen the case for the derivation of the term 'Obeah' from Igbo or a related language. He argues that Igbo slaves in British America influenced the development of the complex of beliefs and practices associated with Obeah in the British Caribbean. Although we do not accept Chambers's entire argument concerning the range of beliefs and practices associated with Obeah – which we believe have multiple origins in African ethnic groups – he does offer tempting evidence to support a view concerning the possible derivation of the term. Chambers notes that the 'functions' of Obeah practitioners in the late eighteenth-century British Caribbean

were similar to those of the *ndi obea* (or *dibia*) of pre-colonial Igboland. ...[T]he *dibia* or *obe* ... could communicate directly with the spirits. Known across Igboland and the heavily Iboesque coastal settlements as powerful and dangerous, and thus feared and respected everywhere, such 'doctors' ... combined their sacred knowledge of the spirit-world with a practical pharmacological knowledge. ... [T]he *dibia* or *ndi obea* in historical Igboland and the 'obeahmen' of pre-modern Afro-Caribbean societies were responsible for ascertaining why things happened, remedying or influencing them, and punishing transgressors.<sup>18</sup>

A recent book by John Anenechukwu Umeh on Igbo cosmology shows how far-ranging the present-day *dibia* concept is, and how broad the semantic domain covered by the term. 'Those who try to find the English equivalent to *dibia* have wasted their time,' writes Umeh,

for there is no such English thing. To call him a traditional Doctor is to straitjacket him or her into a jacket too narrow to be meaningful at all. To call *Dibia* a herbalist is to pick up a drop from the Ocean and call it the Ocean. Similarly, calling the *Dibia* a psychologist or healer or destroyer of witches or mender of broken bones or any such single or a group of curative activities, would fall seriously short of the full

meaning. *Dibia* is holistic and so is knowledge and wisdom. They have no end ... The fact that the *Dibia* is *Di Abia*, the expert in knowledge and wisdom, in a holistic sense, immediately places him or her head and shoulders above every other expert or adept that exists in society. As a matter of fact, many *Dibias* attained expertise in several fields of endeavour simultaneously.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, the broad range of skills and abilities attributed to the *dibia* closely match those associated with the individuals referred to as 'Obeah-men' in the Caribbean during the slavery period. These include, but go beyond, curative techniques and healing powers; and they are normally associated with socially positive ends. The generality of the term *dibia* also means that it could easily have been applied to a wide range of similar beliefs and practices belonging to other African ethnic groups. Furthermore, Umeh stresses that the term *dibia* is actually made up of two words, *di*, meaning 'husband', 'adept', or 'master', and *abia*, meaning 'knowledge and wisdom'.<sup>20</sup> When the central lexical component of this compound term (*abia*: 'knowledge and wisdom') is viewed standing alone, it presents us with a close parallel for 'Obeah' (pronounced /obia/ throughout the Anglophone Caribbean), both semantically and phonologically.<sup>21</sup> In fact, in his English-Igbo dictionary, Northcote Thomas gives *obia*, in addition to *dibià*, as Igbo terms for what he glosses in English as 'doctor'. In the Caribbean setting, a combined Igbo-English term such as 'abia-man', then, would have meant something like 'a man of knowledge and wisdom [in the sacred arts]' (such hybrid lexical items, fusing African-derived terms with the English morpheme *-man*, being common in the creole languages of the region). Given all of the above, the Igbo word *abia* would seem to constitute a much more persuasive etymology for 'Obeah' than all the previously-positing African terms, most of which have a narrower focus, and refer to negative concepts of witchcraft or sorcery (as does, for example, the most commonly-accepted previous attribution, Twi *o-bayifó*).<sup>22</sup>

We would like to re-emphasize that the extent to which Igbo or related people(s) influenced the *behaviours and beliefs* of what came to be called Obeah in Barbados (and elsewhere) remains to be demonstrated, since much of the direct evidence for historical Obeah in Barbados could be derived from any number of West African cultures.<sup>23</sup> However, it is not unlikely that the term 'Obeah' was derived from Igbo or a related language (perhaps even from another linguistic group) where it had neutral or largely positive social connotations and meanings that can be roughly rendered into English as, for example, 'practitioner, herbalist', 'doctor', 'spiritual power', or 'knowledge of the sacred arts' – but not witchcraft, sorcery, and the like.

Whatever particular African language gave rise to the term 'Obeah', one might hypothesize an etymology that involves its emergence into one or more of the pidginized or creolized vehicular languages spoken in coastal slaving ports and then carried to the Caribbean.<sup>24</sup> However, neither author has been able to find evidence for the word in an early West African creole/pidgin, and an alternative possibility is that the term was first used in the Caribbean itself.<sup>25</sup> One can imagine a scenario in which native English-speakers in the British Caribbean, in Barbados or another early English colony, adopted the term from some African language (Igbo or Igbo-related?) without being aware of its full meaning in that language group. The adopted term referred, or was related, to a type of slave healer who was involved with spiritual or magical practices, or the practices themselves which, although not fully understood by Europeans, were known to be of non-European origin.

Although whites in Barbados were using the term 'Obeah' by the early eighteenth century, or earlier, the term may not have been widely used by Barbadian slaves themselves during this period, when many were African-born and from different language groups. On the other hand, it is also possible that, among the general slave population, the term underwent semantic expansion early on (no longer being restricted to speakers of the language from which it was derived, or to its original, ethnically-specific meanings) and began to be applied to a broad variety of overlapping African beliefs and practices.<sup>26</sup> In any case, it is known that Europeans (i.e., native English-speakers) continued to use this term to refer to an increasingly wide range of supernatural-related practices followed by the enslaved (regardless of their ethnolinguistic origin) but which derived from several West African cultural traditions. Over time the term was adopted in the Caribbean by other enslaved persons from various African language groups or of creole birth. The term diffused throughout the British Caribbean and came to be employed more widely by whites as well as by the enslaved themselves. In Barbados, in particular, by the last part of the eighteenth century, when the great majority of slaves was creole, the term 'Obeah' was employed by persons of all racial groups. However, whites and blacks tended to place different emphasis on its meaning and functions, and the latter viewed the practices associated with Obeah in much more socially beneficial terms than the former. This appears to have been true in other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean as well.<sup>27</sup>

The evidence suggests that only in later years, following extensive missionization and the further entrenchment of hegemonic colonial values and ideologies (which continued during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), were definitions of the term reduced (with varying degrees of

completeness) to the one-sided, negative understandings of Obeah held by whites, who saw the diverse beliefs and practices denoted by this word as little more than witchcraft or sorcery.<sup>28</sup> Only in Suriname, where English has not been the colonial language of prestige for over three centuries – and particularly among the Maroons of that country, who were able to build societies and cultures largely beyond the reach of European colonial powers – has the term ‘Obia’/‘Obeah’ remained unambiguously positive, referring almost exclusively to forms of spiritual power (and related objects or materials) used for socially beneficial ends such as healing and protection.<sup>29</sup>

### NOTES

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1. For example, the knowledgeable Griffith Hughes reporting on the 1730s and 1740s – when he lived in Barbados – wrote how Barbadian slaves ‘are very tenaciously addicted to the rites, ceremonies, and superstitions of their own countries’ (*The Natural History of Barbados* [London, 1750], p.15).
2. Jerome S. Handler, ‘Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, ca. 1650 to 1834’, *New West Indian Guide*, 74 (2000), pp.57–90.
3. Kenneth M. Bilby, ‘The Strange Career of “Obeah”’: Defining Magical Power in the West Indies’ (General Seminar, 9 Nov. 1993, Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power & History, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore).
4. Jamaica, *Acts of Assembly* (1769), quoted in Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p.162. This action against Obeah was included in a wider slave law that was designed to prevent a number of practices, including ‘the evils arising from irregular assembly of slaves, ... their possessing arms and ammunition, and from going place to place without tickets’, as well as ‘the practice of obeah’; the act is published by title only (as one of several 1760 ‘public acts obsolete, repealed, or expired’) in *Acts of Assembly, passed in the Island of Jamaica, from the Year 1681 to the year 1769* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1787), Vol.2, p.6.
5. Arthur Holt, Letters to Henry Newman, 18 Feb. 1729 (Letter Books, Series B, Vol.6, item 62; United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Archives, London) and Bishop Gordon, 7 March 1729 (Fulham Papers, General Correspondence, Vol.15, ff.266–7, Lambeth Palace Library, London); Hughes, *Natural History*, pp.15–16.  
For other eighteenth-century attributions in the West Indies, but none earlier than 1760, see, for example, Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.412–13; Bilby, ‘Strange Career of “Obeah”’; F.G. Cassidy and R.B. Le Page, *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp.326–7.
6. Thomas Walduck, Letters to James Petiver, Nov. 1710 – Sept. 1712 (Sloane Manuscripts 2302, British Library, London). Several early sources that mention or briefly discuss Barbadian slave religious practices do not mention Obeah (e.g., Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* [London, 1657], pp.47, 51; Anon., ‘A Briefe

Description of the Ilande of Barbados,' in V.T. Harlow (ed.), *Colonizing Expeditions to the West Indies and Guiana, 1623–1667* [London: Hakluyt Society, 1925], p.45; Alexander Gunkel and Jerome Handler (eds.), 'A Swiss Medical Doctor's Description of Barbados in 1661', *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 33 [1961], pp.3–13; Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro's and Indians Advocate* [London, 1680], p.33). For details on Walduck's letters, see Jerome S. Handler, *A Guide to Source Materials for the Study of Barbados History, 1627–1834* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p.135; *ibid.*, *Supplement to A Guide to Source Materials for the Study of Barbados History, 1627–1834* (Providence, RI: The John Carter Brown Library, 1991), p.52.

7. Although the term may have been used in Barbados much earlier, the evidence is more ambiguous. The Barbados Department of Archives contains many volumes of official records dating from the seventeenth century. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, scribes recopied some of the original seventeenth-century Deed Books that were becoming increasingly fragile. Thus, today the Department has both the original volumes (many of which are now closed to the public) and the recopied volumes, which are commonly used by researchers. In a 1676 deed, relating to a plantation transaction in the parish of St Michael, the plantation's property is itemized. This itemization contains two identical lists giving the age-group, gender, and names of the plantation's slaves. In the original Deed Book (Barbados Archives RB1/14, pp.51–4) one of the 'Men Negroes' is listed as 'Abeah' on both of these lists. In the recopied Deed Book, the spelling on one list is 'Abeah' while on the other list it is 'Obeah' (Barbados Archives RB3/9, pp.287–93). The copyist may simply have transliterated 'Abeah' to 'Obeah' when transcribing the second list, but the name 'Abeah' for a slave does not appear among a sample of 2229 Barbadian slave names and it remains possible that the slave name listed on the 1676 deed was 'Obeah' rather than 'Abeah' (but see the discussion on Igbo *dibia* and *abia* that follows in the main text).

In another recopied deed, dated 1679 (Barbados Archives RB 3/11, p.38), of a property unrelated to the one above, the name 'Obee' appears under the list of 'Negro women'. Obee may be a transliteration of a not uncommon African-type name among Barbadian slave women (e.g., Auba, Aubah, Obah, Obbah), but it may also have been the name by which the slave woman was actually known.

In these two 1670s contexts, a personal name such as Obeah could have referred to a doctor or healer or a similar position in the slave community and not have carried the negative value it did in later periods.

The 1676 deed was brought to Handler's attention by Elaine Breslaw, but we interpret it differently (*Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem* [New York: New York University Press, 1996], p.49). For slave names in Barbados, see Handler and JoAnn Jacoby, 'Slave Names and Naming in Barbados, 1650–1830', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (1996), pp.685–728; for a slave 'known as Obee' in the Virginia Piedmont in 1778, see Phillip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Low Country* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p.620.

8. The sole exception is Suriname, which, however, began as an English colony. Thus, the creole languages spoken there today have an English lexical base, despite the fact that Dutch has been the prestige language for more than three hundred years (see note 26).
9. E.g., Bilby, 'Strange Career of "Obeah"'; Michel Laguerre, *Afro-Caribbean Folk Medicine* (South Hadley, Mass: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), *passim*.
10. E.g., Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, pp.620–21; *ibid.*, pers. comm. The term is not indexed or mentioned in various major works on African-American life during the colonial period, e.g., Alan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Lorena Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

- University Press, 1998). In his well-known *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1974), Peter Wood mentions Obeah, but not in the context of South Carolinian culture (p.289).
11. E.g., Laguerre, *Afro-Caribbean Folk Medicine*, pp.27, 53–4; David T. Bailey, 'Obeah', in R.M. Miller and J.D. Smith (eds.), *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), pp.551–5; Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp.146, 149; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp.171–3; Ulrich Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: D. Appleton, 1918); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Vintage, 1956); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Todd Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p.174.
  12. For example, all of Morgan's earliest citations are from the late eighteenth century (*Slave Counterpoint*, pp.620 n.108).
  13. Cassidy and Le Page, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, p.326; Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), pp.185–6; cf. M.J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Gã People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.137. For acceptance of this etymology, see, for example, Bailey, 'Obeah', p.551; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, p.620; Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting Zion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp.56–7, 224 n.112; Alan Richardson, 'Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797–1807', in M. Fernandez Olmos and L. Paravisini-Gebert (eds.), *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p.190.
  14. *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, p.412. The specific African terms given as possible etyma in Allsopp's entry are: Twi *o-bayi-fo* 'witchcraft man' (also given in *Dictionary of Jamaican English*); Nembe *obi* 'sickness, disease'; Igbo *obi a* 'this (particular) mind'; Ibibio *abia* 'practitioner, herbalist'; and Efik *ubio* 'a charm put in the ground to cause sickness' (also in *Dictionary of Jamaican English*). Other published etymologies proposed for Obeah include: Edo *obi* 'poison' (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 1963); Twi *abia* 'a creeper used in making charms' (*Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1967); Ga *obeye* 'entity within witches' (Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, p.186); Akan *abayide* 'sorcerer' (Ian Hancock, cited in John A. Holm and Alison W. Shilling, *Dictionary of Bahamian English* [Cold Spring, NY: Lexik House, 1982], p.145); KiKoongo (*o*)*b-bi* 'evil' (Hazel Carter, cited in *Dictionary of Bahamian English*, p.145); Awutu *obire* 'charm' (George Huttar, 'Sources of Ndjuka African Vocabulary', *New West Indian Guide*, 59, 3 & 4 [1985], p.59).
  15. Bilby, 'Strange Career of "Obeah"', pp.24–6. The challenges presented in Bilby's paper to a number of conventional assumptions in modern scholarship concerning Obeah, and the larger perspective it offers are, we believe, also fully supported by the ethnohistorical data from Barbados examined by Handler. One modern author who early recognized and emphasized the largely positive functions of Obeah, as well as the way the term and its referents have been negatively redefined by those in positions of power in the Caribbean, is Kamau Brathwaite. Going against the most commonly held views at the period of his writing (in the early 1970s), he noted how 'Obeah ... is an aspect of [healing and protection], though it has come to be regarded in the New World and in colonial Africa as sorcery and "black magic" ... The principle of *obeah* is, ... like medical principles everywhere, the process of healing/protection through seeking out the source or explanation of the cause ... of the disease or fear. This was debased by slave master/missionary/prospero into an assumption, inherited by most [West Indians] ... that obeah deals *in* evil.' See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature', in Sidney W. Mintz (ed.), *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism* (New York: W.W.

- Norton and Company, 1974), p.75.
16. When Walduck was stationed at Barbados (in 1710–12), there were not many slave arrivals in the island from the Bight of Biafra, but the Bight played a much larger role in earlier years. Over the period, 1658–1713, only about 13 per cent of slaves arriving in Barbados came from Bight of Biafra ports (close to 40 per cent came from the Gold Coast), but this figure represents an average for the 55-year period; in earlier years, the percentage of slaves shipped from the Bight of Biafra was much higher. From 1662 to 1670, the Bight of Biafra, as compared to other African port regions, accounted for 54 per cent of all slaves shipped by the English (Barbados and later Jamaica were major destinations) and in 1671–80, it accounted for 32 per cent. The percentage from this region steadily declined throughout the remainder of the late seventeenth and into the early eighteenth centuries: by 1691–1707, the Bight of Biafra accounted for only 11 to 12 per cent of the slaves shipped by English slavers from all African ports. Whatever the decline in slave imports from the Bight of Biafra, it does not rule out the possibility of a lexical introduction then or in earlier periods. For materials on the English/British slave-trade from the Bight of Biafra, See David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.108–9, 166 (Table 7-1), 186–7, 245 (Table 9-1). Cf. Douglas Chambers, “‘My Own Nation’: Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora”, *Slavery & Abolition*, 18, 1 (1997), pp.74–6; David Eltis and David Richardson, ‘West Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade: New Evidence of Long-Term Trends’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 18, 1 (1997), p.21.
  17. Sir Harry Johnston, *The Negro in the New World* (New York: MacMillian Company, 1910), p.253. Johnston is also cited by Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, p.185; and by Melville and Frances Herskovits, *Suriname Folk-Lore* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p.56.
  18. Chambers, ‘My Own Nation’, pp.88–90; cf. Handler, ‘Slave Medicine and Obeah’, for specific historical data on the beliefs and practices associated with Obeah in Barbados.
  19. John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God Is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria* (London: Karnak House, 1997), pp.74–6.
  20. A personal account of one ethnographer’s initiation as a *dibia* in present-day Ohafia, Nigeria, can be found in John C. McCall, *Dancing Histories: Heuristic Ethnography with the Ohafia Igbo* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), pp.23–49. McCall refers to the ‘*ndi dibia*’ (*dibia* people) as a ‘community of healers and diviners’ (p.48).
  21. Northcote W. Thomas, *English–Ibo and Ibo–English Dictionary* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1913), pp.27, 56, 303, 319. Cf. Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, who translate *dibia* as ‘priest/doctor/diviner’ (*Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* [Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1984], pp.16–17, 72).  
It is possible that varying spellings such as *abia* and *obia* reflect regional or dialectal differences in Igbo pronunciation, but it is also possible that this variation is an artefact of the differing orthographic conventions employed by various writers. At any rate, the phonetic values of the vowels represented by the letters ‘a’ and ‘o’ (in *abia* and *obia*) are most likely fairly close. Assuming this is so, then it would take only a relatively minor phonological shift to produce the Anglophone Caribbean term ‘Obeah’ (*obia*) from either Igbo pronunciation (*abia* or *obia*). In contemporary Igbo orthography, the terms are spelled ‘*dibia*’ and ‘*obia*’. The ‘i’ in *dibia* is roughly the equivalent of ‘i’ in the English word ‘bit’; while the ‘o’ in *obia* is close to the vowel represented by ‘au’ in the English word ‘caught’.
  22. However persuasive the etymology suggested here, we are not arguing that it should be seen as exclusive. Multiple etymologies are common in the Caribbean, where the large number of possible languages involved, both African and European (and sometimes Amerindian and Asian as well), often rules out exclusive attributions. Thus, an original or primary etymon such as Igbo *abia* could have been influenced, and perhaps reinforced, over time by terms from other African languages with somewhat similar forms and meanings (whether these similarities were coincidental or the product of a historical

- relationship between the languages in question). See Frederic G. Cassidy, 'Multiple Etymologies in Jamaican Creole', *American Speech*, 41 (1966), pp.211–15.
23. Furthermore, in Suriname, to take another example, the various syncretic beliefs and practices denoted by the term 'Obia' today (and very likely in the past as well) are clearly *not* primarily of Igbo derivation. Rather, most of these (judging from the African-derived ritual languages associated with them, and other evidence) are more clearly related to the beliefs and practices of peoples from a variety of other broad West African ethnolinguistic regions, such as the Gbe (Ewe-Fon), Akan, and Kongo areas.
  24. This possibility was earlier raised in Bilby, 'Strange Career of "Obeah"', pp.25–6.
  25. Although we have not done exhaustive research on this issue, a query addressed to the listserv 'CreoLIST' in October 1999 requested information on whether the term 'Obeah' existed in a creole/pidgin in West Africa during the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries. Several specialists responded to the query but none could provide relevant information. Magnus Huber (pers. comm.), however, kindly sent the following communication: 'As to the term OBEAH ... the word does not occur in West African pidgins before the 19th century. The terms JUJU or GRIGRI (in various spellings) were (and are) used instead' (cf. Magnus Huber, *Ghanaian Pidgin English in its West African Context: A Sociohistorical and Structural Analysis* [Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1999]). In addition, the authoritative historian of West Africa, Robin Law (pers. comm.), is not aware of the term 'in any of the coastal West African sources', including records of the Royal African Company for the 1680s. From such information we feel safe in concluding that the term 'Obeah', although originating in some West African language, was most likely first used by native English-speakers or English creole-speaking slaves in one of the Anglophone Caribbean territories to refer to the supernatural–medicinal complex that emerged among Caribbean slaves.

This conclusion links into current discussions among linguists concerning the origins of the various creoles, and particularly the recent body of work, utilizing late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century texts, on the early English creole in St Kitts, an island colonized by the English in 1624. This work, particularly that of Philip Baker, makes it seem increasingly likely that both St Kitts and Barbados, because of early settlement and development of plantations, played a crucial role in the origins and spread of creolized forms of English, and might have actually been the point of origin for some of the most widespread vocabulary items shared by different English-lexicon creoles.

In a recent article, Baker examines the degree of affinity between the different Atlantic English Creoles (AECs), and discusses what the findings suggest with regard to the origin and diffusion of these languages. He looks at the AECs spoken in seven Caribbean territories, including Barbados (also, St Kitts, St Vincent, Antigua, Jamaica, Guyana, and Suriname) and two non-Caribbean AECs (Gullah and Sierra Leone Krio) with respect to 138 'diagnostic' linguistic features (most of them lexical items). Baker finds that the term 'Obeah' is shared by all seven of the Caribbean AECs, but is not found in Gullah or Krio (the absence of Obeah from early Krio is also attested by M. Huber and C. Corcoran, pers. comms.). This finding may be viewed as evidence supporting the hypothesis that the term 'Obeah' emerged (or at least was creolized and took on the broad meanings it now has) in the Caribbean – very possibly in Barbados or some other very early site of settlement and economic expansion. See Philip Baker, 'Investigating the Origin and Diffusion of Shared Features among the Atlantic English Creoles', in Philip Baker and Adrienne Bruyn (eds.), *St Kitts and the Atlantic Creoles: The Texts of Samuel Augustus Mathews in Perspective* (London: University of Westminster Press, 1999), pp.315–64.

26. That the term 'Obeah' may have spread among the general slave population (or was adopted by whites) at a very early stage in the history of Barbados is suggested by the fact that the term exists today in the former Dutch colony of Suriname, where it is usually spelled 'Obia'. Indeed, the beliefs and practices associated with the term 'Obeah'/'Obia' in Suriname are probably more integrally connected with everyday life and religious

- practice in that country (where *obia* has entirely positive meanings) than are corresponding beliefs and practices (denoted by the same term) anywhere else in the Caribbean. (The reasons for this are discussed at length in Bilby, 'The Strange Career of "Obeah"'.) Suriname was first successfully colonized by English planters and their slaves from Barbados, beginning in 1651. In the ensuing years, additional settlers arrived from Barbados, and, to a lesser extent, St Kitts, Nevis, and Montserrat. However, the British relinquished control of Suriname to the Dutch in 1667, and the last major group of English settlers and their slaves left the colony in 1680. It was during this brief period, when substantial numbers of English (most of them from Barbados) were present (1651–80), that the English lexical base of the Suriname creole languages (which are still spoken today) was introduced, and it is very likely that the term 'Obeah'/'Obia' – which remains a culturally-important lexeme in all three of the major Surinamese creoles (Sranan, Ndyuka, and Saramaccan) – entered Suriname from Barbados during this period as well. If this was the case, then either the original African etymon of 'Obia'/'Obeah', or a transformed, creolized version of it, would have had to be current in Barbados by at least the mid-seventeenth century.
27. After reading an earlier draft of this article, Richard Allsopp suggested that written laws and regulations intended to suppress Obeah 'may have done more to officialize and administratively diffuse the term regionally than black usage'. (Bilby has made a similar argument regarding the diffusion of the Hindi-derived term *ganja* throughout the Anglophone Caribbean during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [as opposed to less common local African-derived terms for cannabis such as *diamba* or *makoni*]; see 'The Holy Herb: Notes on the Background of Cannabis in Jamaica', in Rex Nettleford [ed.], *Rastafari* [Caribbean Quarterly Monograph; Kingston: University of the West Indies, 1985], pp.82–95.) While it seems probable that diffusion of the term *Obeah*, like that of *ganja*, did occur to some extent 'from above', the importance of the role played by official usage in the spread of the term (as well as the meanings attached to it) no doubt varied from place to place. In colonies such as Barbados, Jamaica, and Suriname, it is clear that the term had some currency among the slave population early on, probably well before the colonial authorities began to feel a need to pay close attention to the variety of beliefs and practices it was used to label.
28. This thesis, further developed in Bilby's 'The Strange Career of "Obeah"', was earlier implied in a number of writings by Kamau Brathwaite – most clearly in 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature', p.75 (see note 15). A number of related arguments have been made in a recent study by Nicola H. Götz, *Obeah – Hexerei in der Karibik – zwischen Macht und Ohnmacht* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), pp.99–166.
29. An interesting comparison can be made with the Francophone Caribbean. In Haiti, which has been without a metropolitan French ruling class for some two centuries, and where French, though it remains the official language, is spoken only by a small elite, the Ewe-Fon word 'Vodou' (along with several other local African-derived religious terms) has always had neutral or positive meanings for the monolingual Creole-speaking majority. (This remains the case today, despite the negative redefinition of the term 'voodoo' by North Americans and Europeans as 'black magic'.) Indeed, virtually every serious work on contemporary Haitian social and religious life, from the classic ethnographies of Melville Herskovits (*Life in a Haitian Valley* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937]) and Alfred Métraux (*Voodoo in Haiti* [New York: Schocken, 1972 (1959)]) to the recent volume edited by Donald Cosentino (*Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* [Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995]), situates the term 'Vodou' and the religious practices associated with it within the sphere of 'normal', socially-sanctioned worship, rather than the antisocial realm of sorcery or witchcraft. In contrast, in the French Antillean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, which became overseas departments of France in 1946 and continue to be affected by an overwhelming neocolonial French cultural presence, the most common word for local, Afro-Caribbean magical and/or

spiritual practices, *kenbwa* or *tjenbwa* (*quimbois*), is usually glossed in French with terms such as *sorcellerie* (witchcraft, sorcery), *magie noire* (black magic), or *maléfice* (evil spell). Yet, much like Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, *kenbwa* appears to be used largely for benevolent goals such as protection, healing, and inducing good fortune. For instance, during his ethnographic fieldwork in Martinique in the early 1960s, Richard Price closely observed the daily use of *kenbwa* 'to assure success in fishing, and for self-protection, health, commerce, school exams, love, and other everyday concerns', (*The Convict and the Colonel* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1998], pp.136–46, 199–202).