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Study of the evolution of the character of the Obeah practitioner in a selection of novels set in Jamaica and written in the late 19th and 20th c. Author relates the changing image of the Obeah practitioner to changes in social outlook and demonstrates one way in which literature responds to changing social relationships. Portraits of the Obeah practitioner became increasingly complex as fiction was placed in an historical revisionist framework.

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SHAMANS, SHEPHERDS, SCIENTISTS, AND OTHERS IN
JAMAICAN FICTION

History, in the West Indian plantation context, Sylvia Wynter (1971:95) has observed, is itself "a fiction written, dominated, controlled by forces external to itself". As this observation implies, history may intentionally be designed to organize reality in a particular way by disseminating specific ideas. Accounts of events which are designed to organize reality and impose a way of thinking are classifiable as myths.¹ The mythic dimension of history appears not only in its capacity to incorporate and transmit dominant cultural values and ideologies but also in the changes in historical perspectives which occur when social norms are altered, and old ideologies are superseded. Such changes in the perspectives on the past are also observable in fiction written over a period of time. This is particularly true of West Indian novels which, as Kenneth Ramchand (1971:103) has observed, "even when they are concerned with contemporary reality, nearly all ... are engaged with history."

An important area of Jamaican plantation history relates to African religious practices which, under slavery, were collectively referred to as Obeah. Obeah practitioners, in claiming the power to bring supernatural influences to bear on everyday circumstances, exercised the functions of priests, healers, and magicians. Members of white society recognized the unifying force of African religious beliefs, in slave insurrections, and the Obeah practitioner's leadership role in fomenting these rebellions. Laws were thus enacted to restrict the activities and lessen the authority of these practitioners. In the aftermath of the 1760 rebellion, for example, severe penalties were decreed for persons practicing Obeah, and in a context of endemic slave

insurrections, even black preachers of Christian persuasion had their activities restricted by law (Brathwaite 1971:162-63).

In nineteenth-century fiction written about Jamaica, by whites, Obeah practitioners have been depicted primarily as sorcerers who use their influence to recruit spies in the Great House and to create disaffection within the slave community. In such fiction, little distinction is made between different African religious observances. Obeah and Myal are grouped together; the Myal men being simply "another class of impostors" (Hamley 1862:155). Because of their involvement in resistance to white oppression, Obeah practitioners² are perceived only in roles in which they harness malevolent forces for anti-social purposes. This perspective on the Obeah practitioner, in the literary context, served to reinforce that which was established by law and justified the harsh measures which were adopted to bring them under control.

The oppositional stance of Obeah and Myal practitioners to the values of white society, during slavery, made them significant figures in the folk/popular tradition. In the post-emancipation period, Myal was increasingly regarded as a force working counter to Obeah which became identified more specifically with practices which were ill-intentioned and self-serving.³ This distinction between Obeah and Myal has been reflected in twentieth-century novels where the practitioner, in his function as religious leader or spiritualist with healing powers, is distinguished from the sorcerer or wizard who has a harmful influence. Portraits of the Obeah practitioner became increasingly complex in the twentieth century, as fiction came to be written by Jamaican creoles who were often engaged in a type of historical revisionism.

The discussion below examines the evolution of the character of the Obeah practitioner in a selection of novels set in Jamaica and written in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It relates the changing image of the Obeah practitioner to changes in social outlook and demonstrates one way in which the literary product responds to the context of altered social relationships. As mentioned above, powers which were once attributed to a single individual may be distributed among two or more characters in a novel. Characters may be variously identified, by such titles as Shepherd, Elder, Brother, Mother, or Prophet without a specific mention of Obeah.

A tradition of portraying the Obeah practitioner in fiction was well established by the mid-nineteenth century. Obeah practitioners were usually depicted as persons of advanced age, hideous aspect, and venal nature.⁴ A notable exception is Hamel, the central figure in the anonymous novel *Hamel, the Obeah Man* (1827), which appeared at the height of the anti-slavery campaign. Hamel, a model of elegance, dignity, and composure has a reassuring physical appearance:

The dealer in magic was of a slight and elegant make, though very small of stature ... His age was at least sixty; but the lines which that had traced on his features indicated, notwithstanding his profession, no feeling hostile to his fellow-creatures, at war with human nature or dissatisfied with himself ... (1827:28-29)

Hamel, the Obeah Man, as Edward Brathwaite (1970:67) has pointed out, is an "anti-Missionary tract" which is critical of Non-Conformist missionary activity. The depiction of the Obeah practitioner's character in this novel clearly serves an ulterior purpose and is linked to a highly topical issue. Such connections between characterization in the novel and issues of contemporary interest can be observed again and again. In general, however, portraits of Obeah practitioners reflect the hostility towards them which existed among members of the local white society. Whether they appear briefly as figures in an exotic landscape or are depicted specifically as disturbing elements within the landscape, accounts of their activities are designed to demonstrate both the absurdity of their claims to extraordinary powers and the gullibility of other Negroes whom they are able to deceive.

A typical portrayal of the Obeah practitioner is given in *Captain Clutterbuck's Champagne* (1861-62) which is set in the 1830s, and details some of the intricacies of color and the presumed effects of climate on character. The author of this novel, Col. William G. Hamley, resided in Jamaica at various times between 1833 and 1864 (D'Costa & Lalla 1989:111, 140). *Captain Clutterbuck's Champagne* depicts the activities of an Obeahman, Congo, and makes special reference to the Obeah practitioner's status during slavery. The narrator observes for example:

the power of Obi over the negro mind has worked many a social and political convulsion, and caused sufficient anxiety to lawgivers. The statutes of Jamaica direct the severest penalties against it ... Its secret has never been fathomed by the white man. (1862:155)

In this novel, the Obeahman is said to be guilty of killing and incapacitating fellow slaves, among other things. This idea of Obeah practitioners as individuals who exploit and injure their own people survives in the fiction until the 1960s.

One of the most sustained portrayals of the Obeah practitioner appears in Mayne Reid's novel *The Maroon or Planter Life in Jamaica* (1873) which was first published in 1862, one year after *Captain Clutterbuck's Champagne*. *The Maroon or Planter Life in Jamaica* is set in Western Jamaica, near Montego Bay, during slavery. The narrator speculates on the nature of the Obeahman's activity and his proper nomenclature (1873:12). His counterparts, it is explained, are "the 'medicine man' of the North American Indians, the 'piuche' of the South, the 'rain maker' of the Cape, the 'fetish

man' of the Guinea Coast." The Obeahman is thus recognized as a shaman figure "known by as many other titles as there are tribes of uncivilized men." The narrator notes that the Obeah practitioner is usually referred to as "professor," but concludes that "practitioner" is the correct term, in the Jamaican context:

'Professor', though often used in speaking of these charlatans, is not a correct title. To have professed it – at least in the hearing of whites – would have been attended with peril: since it was punishable by the death penalty. Practitioner is a more appropriate appellation.

The narrator's witticism serves to document the popularly held view of the Obeahman as a professor or scientist, which still persists in Jamaica.

The practitioner in *The Maroon or Planter Life in Jamaica* is Chakra, an old "Coromantee" who is identified as a Myal Man. Chakra claims to be able to restore dead bodies to life. At the beginning of the novel, Chakra is reportedly dead. He had been tried and condemned to death, the narrator suggests, because his master with whom he had collaborated in several nefarious activities wanted to be rid of him. In the subsequent action, Chakra functions as a submerged evil influence which reappears to frustrate the intentions of the "good" characters and delay the satisfactory outcome of the love stories which constitute the plot and sub-plot. He thus has a function within the structure of the novel and is a useful means of establishing character. White people like the pen-keeper, Jacob Jessuron, who consort with him are clearly evil. There is little mystery to Chakra's resurrection, since he had not been executed but had been chained to a rock and left to starve to death. His escape is engineered by the pen-keeper who wishes to use his services as a poisoner, for Chakra's "magical" powers are further explained by his skill in distilling poisons. This skill is also his means of penetrating the security of the Great House, using gullible female slaves for whom he concocts love philters.

The picture of the Obeah practitioner as a Satanic influence countering "civilized" Christian values is both expanded and altered in Grant Allen's *In All Shades* (1904), originally published in 1886. Allen who spent "some of the most impressionable years of his life" (Caine 1908:60) in Jamaica used this experience in more than one work of fiction.⁵ *In All Shades* is ostensibly set in Trinidad, but various details mentioned in the novel suggest the Jamaican context. This impression is reinforced by Allen's use of place names such as Agualta Estate and Wag Water which suggest a Jamaican context. The Obeah practitioner in the novel, Delgado, a Coromantyn who has been liberated from a Cuban slave trader, is given a fairly prominent part in the action, though his role is not important to the structure of the plot. The

period is that of the late nineteenth century and there are vague references to the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865.

Delgado's character is developed in the context of the debate on African character and gloomy predictions of the Negro's reversion to barbarism. In some respects, he is a throwback to Hamel; he is not described as physically repulsive, and he is able to converse with the educated hero of the novel, in Arabic. The narrator suggests that Delgado, originally a Muslim, has adopted Christianity as a means of relating to the creole slaves. Like Chakra, Delgado makes love philters and thus recruits his spies in the Great House. Most of his energy is spent in fomenting rebellion, however, and there is no collaboration between him and the master class. He is relentless in his effort to bring about the time "when black man will find him heart break out ... Den him sweep away buckra, an' bloodhound, an' all before him an' seize de country, colour for colour" (1904:44). Despite the immensity of Delgado's anger, a whip in the hands of a white man is enough to cow him. Ultimately, he dies of rage, having effected nothing useful for those over whom he had assumed leadership. In the context of the debate on the future of the Negro, the futility of Delgado's gestures is intended to be reassuring.⁶ Moreover, his case demonstrates the error of bringing the African out of his native culture; outside this context which induces a spirit of rebellion, Delgado's diabolical instincts, it is implied, would not have surfaced.

As the case of Delgado suggests, interest in Obeah was kept alive partly by the continued arrival of indentured Africans between 1841 and 1865. In the novel, *Mafoota*⁷, by Dolf Wyllarde (1907), for example, the Obeah practitioner is David Wilts who is referred to on more than one occasion as "the Old African."⁸ Wyllarde, a prolific novelist who wrote a variety of novels set in different parts of the world, uses this character mainly to provide local color. Wilts is of almost peripheral importance in a novel which is primarily concerned with "the ugly thing" (1907:94), miscegenation.

David Wilts conforms to the stereotype "an old disreputable Negro ... dressed in a filthy shirt and old patched trousers, and his face hideous and repulsive as an old monkey's," with a cast of countenance which is "so bestial as to be one of sheer horror" (1907:120-21). Wilts is first seen talking furtively to Lily Scott, the colored housekeeper, whose "animal" eyes, despite the whiteness of her complexion betray "an ugly gleam of inherited instinct and unknown blood traits" (1907:67). By consorting with the Old African, Lily Scott establishes the indelibility of the "taint" in her blood. Thus, although Wilts' part in the action is slight, his cast of character serves to strengthen the unfavorable impression of the mulatto, which the novelist wishes to convey. The description of Wilts' appearance and the suggestions about his behavior also reinforce notions about the level of social and moral

conduct among Negroes, a much debated topic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹

Wilts is also mentioned in connection with a disturbance on a neighboring property and is being sought on suspicion of poisoning cows. As in earlier novels, the narrator discredits the Obeah practitioner's claim to supernatural powers by associating him with poisoning. Though recognizing his influence among his own people, the narrator speaks disparagingly of the tools of his trade: "Eggshells and grave dirt and bullock's blood," and concludes that all that Wilts is ultimately guilty of is "frightening other black people" (1907:127).

Novelists often emphasize the venality of the Obeah practitioner. This is the main characteristic which is mentioned, for example, in Alice Spinner's *A Study in Colour* (1894).¹⁰ Spinner had a strong interest in Afro-Jamaican folkways, but her depiction of the Obeah practitioner in *A Study in Colour* is relatively superficial. This may be due to the fact that the book constitutes a series of sketches rather than a novel. True to the nineteenth-century stereotype, the Obeah practitioner in *A Study in Colour* is old and physically unattractive:

There was an old black Obeah man, who lived in the next village. She knew he was a bad old man ... Certainly one of these days his master, "de big debbil Satan" would take him for his own ... Angie grew more afraid than she had been before at the sight of the ugly old negro with his one earring, who sat all day in the sun and did not work, and yet grew richer than any one else in the parish. (1894:49)

In Spinner's book, which is mainly about the admiration which darker-skinned persons have for lighter-skinned ones, black characters are shown shrinking from the presence of the Obeahman. They distinguish, for example, between the "card cutter" who is useful in helping to recover lost items and the Obeah man who dies "an' go to hell" (1894:96).

This idea of the ugly, old Obeah man, who lacks visible employment but continues to grow rich at the expense of poor people, continues until the middle of the twentieth century. This may be observed both at the level of popular literature¹¹ and in novels like Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*, originally published in 1933, which belongs to the Jamaican classical tradition. Before McKay's description of the Obeah practitioner, however, comes that of H.G. De Lisser who altered the stereotype. De Lisser views the Obeah practitioner's role from an historical perspective in *The White Witch of Rosehall*, first published in 1929.

Unlike the writers whose works have been discussed so far, H.G. De Lisser was Jamaican. Ostensibly, De Lisser continues the tradition of the Obeah practitioner as a Satanic influence working against "civilized"

values, that is, official policies regarding the maintenance of law and order, and accepted codes of behavior within the white caste. In the novel, however, De Lisser juxtaposes a white witch, Annie Palmer, the Mistress on the plantation, to a black Obeahman, Takoo, and shows "civilized" values to be equally threatened by a member of the white caste. Annie Palmer exercises her occult "powers" solely because of her will to dominate others; Takoo exercises his on behalf of persons who depend on him, to ensure the survival of others as well as himself. Takoo thus has wide shamanist functions, while Annie Palmer's role is limited to that of a sorceress.

The action of *The White Witch of Rosehall* is set in St. James, in the two weeks leading up to the December slave rebellion of 1831 which was centered in the Western parishes. De Lisser's portrayal of Takoo, the Obeah practitioner conforms, in some respects, to that popularized by the nineteenth-century novelists. Takoo is identified as a Guinea man and, like David Wilts of *Mafoota*, is referred to as "the Old African" (1982:53, 113). Unlike Wilts, however, Takoo is a figure of considerable presence, "A tall, gaunt, savage-looking black man, with grizzled hair and heavy features" (1982:107). De Lisser does not describe Takoo as ugly. Takoo, like his nineteenth-century counterparts, maintains control within his constituency of the exploited and ill-used by occasional, secret collaboration with the occupant of the Great House. He is implicated, for example, in the murder of one of Annie Palmer's husbands. As in the cases of Chakra and Delgado, his omniscience is accounted for by the fact that he keeps spies in the Great House. His rituals, though useful in demonstrating his hold over his people, are not, the novel shows, the true source of his power. His real tools for carrying out his purposes are poison and physical force. De Lisser, however, attempts to convey the strength of the beliefs which control Takoo's adherents, although his descriptions of their "delirious howls" and, "ejaculations of frenzy" (1982:204) also suggest that they constitute a lunatic fringe.

In general, however, De Lisser conveys the pervasive influence of the Obeah practitioner within the slave community. Takoo defeats Annie Palmer in the contest to control the spirits of the slaves. At his instigation, the seemingly submissive regain their spirits and revolt. De Lisser gives Takoo an active role in the December rebellion to which the killing of Annie Palmer is linked. Takoo tells the other slaves:

It is the white man who have to look for themself now, for we are all free from tonight – every slave in Jamaica is free – and we taking to the mountains to fight until the damn slaveowners here acknowledge our freedom. It come from England an' they keeping it back. Very well, we will take it ourself, even if some of us have to die for it. I expect to die, but dese men with me will live free for ever. And before I die dis woman will; she will go before me. (1982:244)

Takoo thus succeeds where Delgado failed, and he emphasizes the right to be free rather than the settling of a personal score, as Delgado does.

In his ability to initiate action, Takoo departs from the nineteenth-century stereotype of the Obeahman. His incipient political role will be investigated in later portrayals of the Obeah practitioner. De Lisser also presents a version of an historical event which is in marked contrast to that of modern historians who usually mention the teaching of the Christian missionaries, which was reinterpreted by the slaves, as the catalyst in the December 1831 rebellion.¹² In associating Takoo with this revolt, De Lisser links him with the tradition of slave revolts, since the eighteenth century, and highlights the political role of the religious leader and healer in the Jamaican folk tradition.

It might be expected from his involvement in the Harlem Renaissance and his celebration of folk experience in both poetry and prose, that Claude McKay's characterization of the Obeah practitioner would vary significantly from the nineteenth-century mode. However, it conforms more to the nineteenth-century stereotype than De Lisser's. On the one hand, McKay's depiction of the Obeah practitioner may be related to his treatment of religion generally in a novel like *Banana Bottom*, where it is shown to have more of a "shackling than liberating" (1961:73) influence. On the other hand, his use of the stereotype is an aspect of his literary method. Thus, Wumba, the Obeah practitioner, in *Banana Bottom* appears in the guise of the venal charlatan. Moreover, he is not only unmasked but turns to the Christian "magic" when his own fails.

McKay's description of Wumba's physical appearance, paraphernalia, and dwelling seem to undermine any attempts to view this character seriously. The narrator notes (1961:136), for example,

He was a stout junk of a man, opaque and heavy as ebony. Two goat skins were strapped around his loins and from the waist up he was naked except for a necklace of hog's teeth and bird's beaks. His hands and forehead were stained with mangrove dye and his hair was an enormous growth.

This description, which suggests a mid-nineteenth-century context rather than the early twentieth century in which the novel is set, associates Wumba with the popular image of the African witch doctor. His paraphernalia includes "buzzard wings, hawk's feet, dried lizard and snake skins" (1961:136), and the harmless Jamaica species of snake which "all Obeahmen keeps as pets" (1961:127). The isolation of Wumba's cave symbolizes his position in the society – beyond the pale, though secretly involved in the life of the community. Wumba thus functions as the symbol of an idea; he represents one side in a war between the Christian God and Obi who share the

same constituency: "The people worshipped the Christian God-of-Good-and-Evil on Sunday, and in the shadow of the night they went to invoke the power of the African God of Evil by the magic of the sorcerer" (1961:185).

The novel suggests that neither Obeah, "a form of primitive superstition," nor Christianity, "a form of civilized superstition" (1961:124), is of further benefit to the community. Both are involved in the business of deluding individuals and extracting money from them. It is in this context of a scepticism about religion that McKay discredits the Obeah practitioner. Even when religion is dissociated from the magic of the sorcerer, as in the case of the thin little black revivalist woman who interrupts the meeting held by the white revivalist and draws away his congregation with her drums, it leads nowhere¹³. The "contagious clamour" of her drums lead only to trance or self-flagellation.

Although, the Obeah practitioner in *Banana Bottom* has no place in an increasingly secular context, Obeah is recognized as a link with the African past. Squire Gensir, McKay's representation of an enlightened European outlook, tells the heroine of the novel, Bitá, for example, "Obeah is part of your folklore, like your Anancy tales and your digging jammas. And your folklore is the spiritual link between you and your ancestral origin" (1961:125). In other words, Obeah may survive as part of a secular tradition, like the tea meeting, which is referred to frequently in the novel. McKay's depiction of the Obeah practitioner, like his depiction of the Christian missionaries, demonstrates the ineffectiveness of magic in the face of certain social realities. Although he has not altered the image of the Obeahman, he raises questions about the Obeah practitioner's role, which are pursued by novelists of the 1950s and 1960s, in relation to an increasingly urbanized laboring class.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the mood of re-appraisal in the academic context and the growing interest in folk culture reflected an effort to re-evaluate the African past. As early as 1929, the anthropologist Martha Beckwith had examined the traditions of Obeah and Myal, and in the 1930s and 1940s, Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham recorded favorable impressions of the Maroon medicine man.¹⁴ Interest in the properties of herbal medicine and the search for alternative therapies for a variety of illnesses have also tended to legitimize practices associated with the folk healer.¹⁵ Such developments within the society are part of the currency in the intellectual circles to which writers usually belong. Thus, with the increased understanding of the reasons for the hostility of white society to cultural practices which it could not fathom, the Obeah practitioner is, in the novels of the 1950s and 1960s, often cast in the role of one sustaining community values against interlopers who may be brown or black people. In this con-

text of approaching or newly won national independence, the Obeah practitioner's role is also investigated as an aspect of the question of leadership and the reconciliation of diverse cultural traditions.

In novels of the 1950s and 1960s investigation of the role of the magico-religious leader, who is associated with folk tradition, often has a political dimension. The intention to reassess the Obeah practitioner's role may be indicated by the opposition of the figure of the spiritualist and healer who exercises a beneficent influence to that of the sorcerer who preys on ignorant, poor people. This is demonstrated, for example, in the opposition of Brother Man and Brother Ambo in Roger Mais's novel from 1954 *Brother Man*, Prophet Moses and Ambrose, the "obeahman," in Sylvia Wynter's novel from 1962 *The Hills of Hebron*, and Brother Solomon and Shepherd John in Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964). Several functions may be combined in the role of the magico-religious leader who becomes the focus of interest, as is demonstrated in Andrew Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* originally published in 1959 and Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*.

In *A Quality of Violence* and *The Hills of Hebron*, the authors explore the leadership potential of Obeah practitioners or spiritual leaders within folk communities where they have charismatic appeal. The portrait of Dada Johnson in Salkey's novel and Prophet Moses in Wynter's novel are clearly related to the activities of revivalist leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Characterization of these folk heroes focuses both on the influence which their presumed powers gives them in the folk community and on the source and authenticity of their powers.

A Quality of Violence is set at the turn of the twentieth century in a context of class antagonisms which are aggravated by severe economic hardship. The setting is St. Thomas in a period of sustained drought. The activities of the central figure in the novel, Brother Parkin, a "small planter" and usurer, bring him into close contact with Dada Johnson, leader of the local Pocomania group. Parkin is the only person in the community who knows that Johnson, "an obeah man who preferred to be called 'a spiritualist and healer of the afflicted and the discontented'" (1978:36), is an ex-convict and confidence trickster. Parkin, who is a brown man, takes a tolerant view of Johnson's activities, recognizing that his meeting-yard plays a vital role in the life of the underprivileged. Parkin questions, however, whether it is possible to "do good for people" while ignoring "code and custom" (1978:41). Johnson's main fear is that he will one day fail to meet the expectations of the people in the meeting-yard who rely on him, and so lose his constituency. It is this fear which pushes him to excessive displays of his "powers" and results in his death by flagellation.

The significance of Dada Johnson's meeting-yard emerges when his wife, Mother Johnson, attempts to take over his role. In her bid to assume his "powers," she stirs up latent class and color antagonisms which Dada had held in check. Mother Johnson has a brief moment of triumph when she almost destroys Parkin, one of the "milk coffee and bush-tea brown people" (1978:198), by bringing false charges against him.¹⁶ The tables are turned on her almost immediately by Miss Gatha, a member of the meeting-yard who tells the truth which exonerates Brother Parkin. However, the relationship which existed in Dada Johnson's time between Parkin, one of the "brown man class" and the leader of the meeting-yard cannot, as subsequent events demonstrate, be restored. In challenging Mother Johnson's version of events, Miss Gatha aligns herself with forces outside the meeting-yard. These outside forces are ultimately willing to tolerate Mother Johnson, but her own "black Judas people" (1978:204) kill her because of her failure to meet their expectations. Mother Johnson who insistently identifies herself with Africa, in the final pages of the novel, rejects salvation through the agency of Parkin who wants to "hold her in check and keep her under constant supervision, not kill her" (1978:200).

A Quality of Violence thus depicts a decline in the authority of the magico-religious leader, and his increased distance from other sectors of the society. The mutual tolerance which existed between Parkin and Dada Johnson is destroyed when Mother Johnson assumes leadership in the meeting-yard. The dramatic behavior which Dada Johnson and his wife adopt, in order to compel loyalty to the meeting-yard, indicates that the tradition which they represent is increasingly irrelevant in the modern secular context. Moreover, Mother Johnson's attempt to preserve the legend surrounding Dada Johnson, a self-confessed confidence trickster, makes her both victim and perpetrator of a hoax. The sense of catastrophe in the meeting-yard is reinforced by the images of recurrent natural disasters in the novel.

In *The Hills of Hebron*, the social divisions in the wider society are reflected in the distribution of adherents across religious groups in the community of Cockpit Centre. The central figure is Prophet Moses Barton whose name indicates a biblical prototype and whose activities recall those of the local Revivalist, Alexander Bedward. Prophet Moses, "a cavalier of the impossible" (1984:106) is the leader of the New Believers, an Afro-Christian religious group, who symbolically leave their past behind to form the new community of Hebron. Prophet Moses' people dissociate themselves from the Pukkumina group which is led by Brother Ambrose, who is identified as an Obeahman¹⁷, and from the European-supported Non-conformist churches which are represented in Cockpit Centre by Rev. Brook

and his wife Cecilia. The more prosperous of Rev. Brooke's congregation drift to the Anglican church which is situated fifteen miles away.

In *The Hills of Hebron*, which covers a more extended period than Salkey's *A Quality of Violence*, Prophet Moses' political role is more explicit than Dada Johnson's. His activities have, at one point, been interrupted by imprisonment for being a political agitator and "lunatic." He retains his congregation because of his capacity to inspire his followers, but his leadership role is also linked to the issue of land for the people. Moses thus has a wider range of functions than Dada Johnson. Having symbolically led a community out of bondage, he supervises its transition from one stage of development to another, mediates between spiritual and material concerns, negotiating with outside interests to ensure the community's survival. However, he can neither fully separate the community from its past nor prevent contact with new influences which are asserting themselves.

Like other magico-religious leaders before him, Prophet Moses comes to doubt his ability to control his followers, whose faith in him is directly linked to his ability to inspire them spiritually and to ensure their material well-being. Moses feels challenged when he encounters a new secularly-oriented populist message which bases its appeal on economic rather than racial issues. Like Dada Johnson, he attempts to contrive a miracle which will restore the confidence of his uneasy congregation and, as a result, destroys himself. The failure of his gesture becomes a severe test of faith for his adherents.

In depicting Prophet Moses' futile attempt to reassert his type of leadership, Wynter, like Salkey, gives a pessimistic view of the tradition which he represents. Moses, like his nineteenth-century prototype, is, moreover, guilty of complicity with outsiders in his effort to keep his community intact and protect his position as leader. He condones Rev. Brooke's rape of Gloria Chin-Queen in exchange for Rev. Brooke's services in procuring land for the community in Hebron. Underlying the characterization of the magico-religious leader here, as in Salkey's novel is also the figure of Anancy using weapons of the weak, lying and deceit, to survive. Prophet Moses' successors fail to hold the community of Hebron together, partly because they lack the capacity to inspire its members, and partly because his wife, Miss Gatha whose orientation is materialistic rather than spiritual, wants to ensure the succession for her son, Isaac. Isaac grows up, however, to be quite unsympathetic to the goals of the community, which he abandons.

In the novels by Salkey and Wynter discussed above, which were written in a period of heightened national awareness, the magico-religious leader is again cast in the role of the hopeful charlatan. Despite their pessimistic outlook, however, both novels show a recognition of this figure as an ele-

ment of continuity within the folk experience, and as a representative of an African-Jamaican tradition.

Since the 1960s, the relationship between the African and European components of Jamaican culture has been further altered. This development, which is due partly to the continuing research into folk culture and the penetration of the middle class by Rastafarianism, especially since the 1970s, has also affected the portrayal of Obeah practitioners in Jamaican novels. This can be demonstrated, for example, by an examination of Orlando Patterson's *Die the Long Day* (1972) and Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) and *Myal* (1988). In addition to being part of a tradition to be re-evaluated, the magico-religious leader in these novels is used to suggest a viable alternative tradition. Patterson concentrates on the Obeah practitioners problem-solving role in the context of slavery, while Brodber imagines him as the repository of values and beliefs which affect the well-being of the whole society.

In his first novel, *The Children of Sisyphus*, Orlando Patterson had suggested the powerlessness of leadership emerging within the folk environment. Shamanist functions are distributed between Brother Solomon the Rastafarian, who uses the "holy herb" to open the doors of perception, and Shepherd John of the balmyard, who is a further example of the venal charlatan. Brother Solomon's philosophy is defeatist; the effects of spiritual theft which he perceives cannot be counteracted within the social context. His responses are escape on a daily basis by smoking the "holy herb" and, in his more "ambitious fantasies," a return to Africa. Shepherd John is eventually killed by his followers. The outlook is similar to that in Salkey's and Wynter's novels.

In Patterson's *Die the Long Day*, which appeared eight years after *The Children of Sisyphus*, there is a noticeable change of outlook. The novel focuses on aspects of the slave past and shows some of the values which continued to shape the strategies for survival of a suppressed group, in a context of adversity. The medium of communication within the group is Africanus, the Myal leader, who is depicted both as a spiritual leader increasing perception through ritual observances, and as a herbalist/healer administering therapies for mental and physical disorders. Africanus' resilience of spirit and capacity to survive are associated with Anancy. As in *The Children of Sisyphus*, there are disparate goals among the members of the oppressed community, but Africanus remains a common point of reference for all.

In Erna Brodber's novels, there is a shift in focus from the racial experience to the broader colonial experience as shared by the whole society. *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* centres on the alienating effects of the

formal educational system and its religious dimension. *Myal* is more concerned with the potential for leadership and social direction within the folk community. The opposition in the second novel is not, as in McKay's *Banana Bottom*, for example, between organized religion brought in by European missionaries and African derived religion, but between helpful and destructive uses of knowledge and power. There is a similar recognition, however, of religion and the education associated with it as forms of mind control.

Where Patterson's novels suggest the limited power of leaders within the folk community (Africanus can help people to endure oppression, but he cannot change the circumstances), Brodber's novels show their influence reaching beyond it to affect other sectors of the society. Baba Ruddock in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* gains access to academic-intellectual circles.¹⁸ Baba Ruddock who is associated both with Rastafarianism and Obeah links two examples of African-creole expression, and implies the reinforcement of one by the other. Baba Ruddock helps Nellie, the heroine of the novel in her traumatic struggle for self-definition which induces a state of mental and physical collapse. Nellie's character, which is developed to show the effects of the colonial legacy and the conflict of African and European values on the individual life, also reflects those of the society establishing its identity. Baba Ruddock's penetration of the academic community and his role in helping Nellie regain a state of mental and physical well-being may be related to changes in social outlook in the 1970s.

In *Myal*, Mass Cyrus, the spiritualist and healer also gains access to a sector of the society from which he has traditionally been excluded when the "brown people" need his assistance in curing one of their group. Ella, the sick individual, like Nellie, has a representative function in the novel. Ella is both physically and culturally a mulatto. The product of a casual union between an Irish policeman and a black peasant woman, she has, like her society, been created within the context of inequalities between white and black. The novel suggests several parallels between Ella's progress as an individual and historical developments within creole society (Johnson 1992). Like Baba Ruddock, Mass Cyrus treats mental and physical conditions which are directly related. The effect of the cure, as in Nellie's case, is to increase perception and redirect the life of the individual/organism. The combination of functions of the spiritualist and physician in a figure like Mass Cyrus indicates a new direction for leadership, one which ensures that preoccupation with the inspirational role of the leader does not outweigh concern with the practicalities of survival.

Mass Cyrus is a representative figure rather than an individually developed character. Brodber does not give a physical description of this figure

and so avoids the impression of strangeness which usually undermined attempts to portray the figure of the magico-religious leader or the Obeah practitioner seriously. This avoidance of physical description also brings Mass Cyrus closer to a mythic prototype, "the wise old man" of folklore and his counterpart in other cultures, the variously represented shaman. The idea of the wise old man is also represented in the character of Ole African, whose name links Brodber's portrayal of Obeah to the earlier tradition of depicting the Obeah practitioner, and indicates her intention to provide a counterbalance.¹⁹ Mass Cyrus and Ole African are two forces working together, and are not opposed in function as Obeah and Myal were in the post-emancipation period. Brodber thus recalls the original position of white society which did not distinguish between Obeah and Myal. In doing this, she transforms their unity of purpose into a positive value, in the changed historical context.

The changing image of the Obeah practitioner in novels describing Jamaican experience are, as we have shown, related to developments within the society and a changing perspective on the past. In nineteenth-century novels, the character of the Obeah practitioner was important primarily as an aspect of local color, and an example of outlandish practices in which Negroes indulged. In the early-twentieth-century novel, the character of the Obeah practitioner could become a structural element in the novel, gaining meaning from the practitioner's relationship to other characters, as in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*. In novels of the late 1950s and 1960s, Obeah practitioners are depicted as elements of continuity within an Afro-creole tradition and their roles are seriously explored in relation to the question of leadership. In more recent novels, the Obeah practitioner, as a symbol of the capacity to survive and an element of continuity with the African and the slave past, is portrayed as an enabling force and an alternative source of knowledge. This progression in the role of the Obeah practitioner, as depicted in the novel, demonstrates the shaping force of the prevailing historical outlook and a way in which ideology is articulated through fiction.

NOTES

1. This definition combines views of myth as a way of "classifying and organizing reality" (Eagleton, 1983:104) and as a widespread, though not always false idea, influencing social behavior.
2. Obeah women are also referred to as, for example, Mammy Venus, who is mentioned in Henrietta Jenkins's *Cousin Stella*.
3. Myal, which has been distinguished as community-oriented and benign in its influence, was

increasingly, in the post-emancipation period, associated with African derived medical practices which had been beneficial during slavery. See, for example, Schuler (1979).

4. This is specifically remarked on in Mayne Reid's *The Maroon or Planter Life in Jamaica* (1973:12): "Universally they [obeah practitioners] were persons of advanced age and hideous aspect; the uglier the more successful in pursuit of their criminal calling." Attitudes to obeah practitioners were ambivalent. Frederick Charles Tomlinson includes this footnote to his text in *The Helions or the Deeds of Rio* (1903:108), a satire describing local politics in the post-emancipation period: "*Obeahman*. A special local statute, designed exclusively in the interests of this personage, describes him as 'one who for gain pretends to the use of supernatural power.' This, at first blush, looks not unlike a clumsy attempt at a false pretence. But it was not so deemed in Princeville: with the result that the obeahman enjoyed an enormous vogue not at all fair to other criminals."

5. See, for example, Allen (1893), *Ivan Greet's Masterpiece*. In *The Cruise of the Port Kingston* (1908:60), William Ralph Hall Caine has also noted that Allen's Jamaican experience "provided colouring for more than one entertaining novel and inspiration for much more enduring work achieved in that busy life." Caine also mentions, "Mr. Frankfort Moore, in the role of novelist," and Miss Dolf Wyllarde who drew upon "the same inexhaustible fount."

6. The planned insurrection, the text discloses, fails because of "the hereditary respect for European blood which is instinctive in the West Indian negro's nature" (1904:250), and because the negroes recognize Harry Noel, who is assumed to be white, as a brown man, and are reluctant to kill one of their own blood. In this connection, an observation by the narrator in F. Frankfort Moore's *Shipmates in Sunshine* might be noted. Here the narrator refers to "what the negroes have happily always lacked – a leader" (1903:98).

7. My thanks to Barry Higman who mentioned this novel to me.

8. Note Erna Brodber's use of the name Ole African in her novel, *Myal* (1988).

9. Views on the future of "the Negro race" were extremely pessimistic towards the end of the nineteenth century. See for example, H. A. Will, *Constitutional Change in the British West Indies 1880-1903* (1970:244-45). In the view of the narrator of Frankfort Moore's *Shipmates in Sunshine* (1903:88-89), the West Indian negro is the "least satisfactory of nature's handiwork: He seems to have no intelligence, and only that form of cunning which is an insult to the intelligence of the people against whom it is directed. His is a born liar and a contemptible coward ... He in no way resembles the genial coloured gentleman of the Carolina cotton fields, or the pleasant Krooboy of the West Coast of Africa. To compare him with the lordly Zulu, the Basuto, or the common nondescript Kaffir ... would be ridiculous. The West Indian negro would be wiped out of Cape Colony in ten years. It is a great pity that he cannot be wiped out of the West Indies."

10. Alice Spinner is the pseudonym of Augusta Zelia Fraser, who was resident in Jamaica in the 1890s when her husband worked there as a civil servant, see Bryan (1991:199).

11. An example is Ada Quayle's *The Mistress* (1957). Chi-ju-ju, the Obeahman in this novel, is obviously included for local color.

12. See, for example, Turner (1982).

13. The heir to the tradition which is represented by the white missionaries, the Craigs, is Patou, their idiot son, who predeceases them. The black Afro-Christian tradition is disqualified when its representative, Herald Newton Day, is discovered in an act of bestiality. Revivalism, led either by whites or blacks, is shown to lead nowhere, and Wumba, the Obeahman, is exposed as a charlatan.

14. See Beckwith (1969), Hurston (1938), and Dunham (1946).

15. See, for example, Elkins (1977) and Last & Chavunduka (1986).

16. The circumstances are as follows: A little girl, Doris, becomes mysteriously ill, following a quarrel with another girl, Linda, with whom she has been playing. Mother Johnson advises against sending for a doctor and undertakes to heal Doris. When Doris dies under her treatment, Mother Johnson attempts to blame the death on Obeah set by Linda's parents and Brother Parkin and his wife.

17. The narrator observes: "These voodoo followers of the 'obeahman,' Ambrose, believed in the malevolent cruel spirits opposed to man. Theirs was a lost god of Africa, who, for their sins, had abandoned them" (1984:115). Ambrose, "an incarnation of the dark spirits," is opposed to the white man's god whom Prophet Moses attempts to reinterpret to meet his people's needs.

18. Rastafarians like Ras Dizzy and Ras Mortimer Planno were frequently on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in the 1960s and the 1970s. This period saw the rise of the yard theater and interaction between academics and communities in Greenwich Town and August Town, for example.

19. A third member of the trio controlling the spiritual dimension is Miss Gatha. Brodber, in effect, restores Salkey's Miss Gatha to the meeting-yard.

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