Diana Paton

The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xii + 361 pp. (Cloth US\$ 99.00)

The recent flurry of academic publications on obeah in fields ranging from literary criticism and religious studies to history and anthropology probably owes more than a little to the conceptual slipperiness of the term. It is remarkable that a word that has loomed so large in both vernacular and elite discourses in the former British Caribbean is so contested. The controversy over its meaning gives obeah a central role in postcolonial critiquing.

Now that a scholarly consensus has emerged that obeah does not refer to a single, coherent phenomenon, the time is ripe for studies that focus more on what obeah is *about* than what it *is*. Historian Diana Paton is more interested in what obeah has been about in the past than what it might be about today, but she is clearly aware of the potential significance of her findings for the rethinking of obeah in the present. Her book, based on solid archival and library research, is a major step forward in the ongoing attempt to recover past understandings. Paton points to her “efforts not to uncover the ‘real’ obeah, but rather to show how the variety of practices and beliefs that have been deemed to be obeah have been regulated, suppressed, discussed, represented—and how all of these activities have been part of the process by which obeah has been produced and stabilized as an object” (p. 8). The book is an examination of “the complex history of the construction and reconstruction of obeah as discursive category, legal artefact, and everyday practice” (p. 16). In effect, it “tells not the history of obeah itself, but of the swirling layers of representation that surround it” (p. 314).

To get at this complex history, Paton adopts a kind of “criminal justice history approach” (p. 14). Following background on previous scholarship on obeah and the political and ideological climates within which colonial representations developed, chronologically ordered chapters focus on the many punitive imaginings of obeah handed down by the legal, political, and media institutions that played a fundamental role in shaping public understandings of it. Along the way Paton corrects many common misconceptions, making important contributions to the growing revisionist literature on the topic. Particularly impressive is the chapter entitled “Obeah Prosecutions from the Inside,” which makes unprecedented use of contemporary newspaper reports, combining these with ethnographic and other scholarly sources to read between the lines. The penultimate chapters—“Protest, Development, and the Politics of Obeah” and “The Post-Colonial Politics of Obeah”—are equally illuminating, bringing the story up to the near-present. By the end, it is difficult to argue with her conclusions

that “the ongoing hostility to and rejection of obeah reflects, perhaps most of all, the distance between classes in the Anglo-Creole Caribbean” (p. 315), and that the traditional out-of-hand rejection of obeah by both elites and some in the lower strata “works effectively to maintain class and race relationships in the contemporary Caribbean” (p. 316).

Paton acknowledges that in focusing primarily on anti-obeah legislation, policing, prosecuting, and punishing rather than obeah itself, she risks producing “a story that is only about the top-down imposition of power.” “It would be ironic,” she continues, “if, at the point at which ‘obeah’ became a sign of resistance rather than of evil, works of scholarship such as this one argued that it was not created by enslaved and colonized people at all, but rather was a construction of the colonizer” (p. 8). Indeed, she is at pains to show that she does not see things this way. Rather, she wants to show that obeah (whatever it might actually be) “was a *mutual* construction, made in the spaces between the powerful’s imposition and the colonized’s resistance” (p. 8). Be this as it may, the vision she presents of how obeah might have been (or might presently be) understood by those for whom it was (and is) an everyday reality remains seriously lopsided. She should be congratulated for her efforts to include the voices of those who actually *live(d)* obeah (again, whatever this might actually be). (Her attempts to interpret contemporary court testimony in conjunction with other sources to get at this side of things must be seen as path-breaking.) But there are too many filters between the punitive literature of power she relies on and those who were the victims of this power to allow complete confidence in her interpretations regarding the understandings of obeah held by the latter. Ways must be found to remove more of these filters—perhaps by allowing ethnography yet a greater role in such dialogues with the past.

This book is a signal achievement, one that no scholar interested in the “true” meaning(s) of obeah, past and present, can afford to ignore. It tells us much about where scholarship on this important topic needs to go from here.

Kenneth Bilby

Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington DC 20560, U.S.A.

kmbilby@gmail.com