
Obeah and Other Powers could be viewed as the culmination of three centuries or so of Afro-Caribbean scholarship, for it could not (or at least would not) have been written a generation ago. This is due primarily to the evolution that has occurred in Afro-Caribbean scholarship, particularly in regard to religions or spiritual practices that have been referred to variously as African or African-derived.

The earliest reports, of course, were written from a manifestly Eurocentric, and thus culturally absolutist, perspective. Much later, the move toward a Boasian cultural relativism or Durkheimian functionalism notwithstanding, the Caribbean cultures and peoples with their roots in Africa were viewed as too heterogeneous or “impure” to warrant serious anthropological attention. Around the mid-twentieth century increased attention began to be given to “Africanisms,” those atavistic cultural occurrences that could be traced back to their place of origin, usually in sub-Saharan West Africa. In the 1970s and 1980s, due primarily to the work of scholars such as Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, another shift in perspective encouraged Afro-Caribbean scholars to focus, ironically, more on the circum-Caribbean cultural area and less on African origins. Suddenly, Orisha in Trinidad, Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, and Vodoun in Haiti, for example, were viewed as distinctly New World products, cultural creations that possessed some sort of connection with sub-Saharan Africa of course, but that were nevertheless forged in the fires of the colonial and postcolonial struggles of peoples of African descent. This Caribbean focus continues its evolution in Obeah and Other Powers and similar works.

In the introduction, the editors state their three primary themes: the role that state/government/legal hostility has played in shaping Afro-Caribbean religiosity; the role that practitioners themselves played in shaping their religious and spiritual practices; and the importance of looking at Afro-Caribbean religious and spiritual practices and ideology as a composite whole. The primary emphasis of the articles is on circum-Caribbean structures, processes, and events that have shaped religion and spirituality in the Caribbean with little discussion of “Africanisms.”
The “other powers” of the title refers not only to other religious and spiritual practices similar to obeah but also to the powers that, for example, animate spirit possession in Orisha or Vodoun. A bit more broadly, “other powers” refers to the influence of colonialism, including legal proscriptions against the practice of obeah, Orisha, Santería, et cetera. Writers, scholars, and artists who have contributed to the current perception of these practices, and the practitioners who continue to shape the nature and form of their religious or spiritual practices are also part of the “other powers.”

Part One, “Powers of Representation,” includes four papers on aspects of music, writing, or art that make some statement about obeah, construed broadly, or some aspect of Caribbean religion. Kenneth Bilby’s “An (Un)natural Mystic in the Air: Images of Obeah in Caribbean Song” discusses the various Caribbean connotations of the term “obeah” and how the term is used in vernacular expressions. Alasdair Pettinger’s “‘Eh! eh! Bomba, hen! hen!’: Making Sense of a Vodou Chant” examines the various ways in which this popular chant has been interpreted and used in Haiti. Alejandra Bronfman’s “On Swelling: Slavery, Social Science, and Medicine in the Nineteenth Century” discusses the nineteenth-century medical texts of Henri Dumont and the role they played in shaping an “anthropology of slavery.” Finally, Katherine Smith’s “Atis Rezistans: Gede and the Art of Vagabondaj” looks at an interesting piece of urban art and how it represents the spirit Gede, Haiti’s “cosmic recycler of life and death.”

Part Two, “Modernity and Tradition in the Making,” looks at the practice and public perception of obeah and obeah-like activities and their influence on the transformation of the cultural ethos of Martinique, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Cuba. John Savage’s “Slave Poison/Slave Medicine: The Persistence of Obeah in Early Nineteenth-Century Martinique” examines the ambiguity and confusion regarding the practice of obeah in Martinique as it was widely used both to heal and to harm. Diana Paton’s “The Trials of Inspector Thomas: Policing and Ethnography in Jamaica” explores the process whereby obeah came to be conceptualized in Jamaica and the role played in this process by “day-to-day enforcement of the law.” In “The Moral Economy of Spiritual Work: Money and Rituals in Trinidad and Tobago,” Maarit Forde argues that the modernizing trends of capitalism have not affected the “economics” of spiritual healing in this two-island nation. Finally, Elizabeth Cooper’s “The Open Secrets of Solares” discusses