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Gnostic *Obia* from *Chukwu Abiama* to Jah Rastafari:
A Theology of the JamAfrican *Obia* Catholic Church

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Abstract

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by Claudette A. Anderson

What is *Obia*? For centuries, *Obia* has been demonized as the foolish superstition of deluded Diasporic Africans. The prevailing attitudes toward *Obia* in Jamaica and the West have been shaped by ethnocentric British discourse framed in the 1760 Obeah Act which outlawed “the wicked Art of Negroes.” Notwithstanding hegemonic representations of *Obia* which consistently fail to define it, *Obia* remains the enduring signifier of African culture and religion in Jamaica. Using Igbo mysticism as a theological framework, this dissertation argues for a reconceptualization of *Obia* as a form of Gnosticism or Revealed Knowledge. This scholarship differs from previous studies of *Obia* by using an interdisciplinary approach grounded in Esotericism, Spiritual Anthropology and Cognitive Science of Religion. I utilize the heteroglossia of interdisciplinary scholarship to argue that the *Obia* of the Niger Delta *Ndibia*, as well as other continental African healing professions, were transformed within the context of spiritual terror which characterized Jamaican slave society. Ultimately, this dissertation advances a theology of JamAfrican *Obia* as pan-human universal religion, comprised of eight major denominations which together constitute the JamAfrican *Obia* Catholic Church (JOCC). In this conceptualization, “Working *Obia*” references the techniques, rituals and activities attendant to the acquisition and use of Revealed Knowledge; and the noun *Obia* defines (1) the body of Revealed Knowledge and (2) the *Obia* practitioner as Gnostic Revealer.

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in sincere acknowledgement of a mother's boundless love.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Distribution Agreement
Approval Sheet
Abstract Cover Page
Abstract
Cover Page
Acknowledgments
Table of Contents

1. “TANK YUH JEEAS FI DIS OBIA!” A PRELIMINARY TOWARDS JAMAFRICAN GNOSTIC OBIA THEOLOGY	1
2. “ONE NEGRO CAN BEWITCH ANOTHER (OBIA THEY CALL IT)”: WORKING “THE UNCLEAN THING” AND EFFECTING “POWERFUL HEALING”.....	62
3. A HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM OF OBIA: THIS “BLACK THREAD OF MISCHIEF, AS POWERFUL AN AGENT AS SLAVERY”.....	109
4. FROM OBIA MISSION TO OBEAH FACTORY: SPIRIT THEOLOGY AND THE JAMAFRICAN OBIA CATHOLIC CHURCH	154
5. GNOSTIC OBIA: AFRICAN <i>SPIRITUOLOGY</i> FROM <i>CHUKWU ABIAMA</i> TO JAH RASTAFARI	208
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	264

CHAPTER 1

“TANK YOU JEEAS FI DIS OBIA”:
A PRELIMINARY TOWARDS JAMAFRICAN GNOSTIC OBIA THEOLOGY

What is Obia? What is Obia? What is Obia? What is Obia? What is Obia? Obia is evil. Obia is iniquity working. Obia is witchcraft. Obia is when people send blow fi yuh. What is Obia? Negative energy: the opposite of good. My answer based on what I hear overtime, dat is something bad. What is Obia? When mi did small mi modda used to say people ina di yaad a Obia wi. An she go way go look afta it. So who she say she did a go to? She neva say who. She say she a go look. What is Obia? Obia is when people set duppy pon you. What is Obia? Obia is when di people dem caal, get di gift ina Revival and den dem go spoil. What is Obia? Why did Obiaman dem mus open church? What is Obia? Mi know one man, im neva do nuh bad yet, im nuh kill nobaddy nor nothing. What is Obia? Mi see di man push di knife down ina di candle and treat it wid all kind a spray and oil. What is Obia? Man call up man. All Alcapone come up and ask who dem want him fi kill. What is Obia? P. is a Spiritual Surgeon. Him is di big Obiaman. What is Obia? Higher heights and deeper depths. What is Obia? Obia is di unclean ting...and is powaful healing. What is Obia? Obia is Primal. Obia is Primal... Obia is...

Fieldwork phrases¹

What is Obia? This is the interrogative mantra of a scholarly discourse engaged with the complex phenomenon called Obia. What, Whither, How, Why Obia? I asked a middle-aged Revival Modda, “What is Obia?” Her reply: “Obia is the unclean ting...and powerful healing.” I posed the same question to a younger Revivalist healer. The response: “Higher heights and deeper depths.” Back in Atlanta, I asked an Obiaman in the Coptic Gnostic Circle, “what is Obia?” His answer: “To me, Obia is like Number Nine Magic: it is the power to do good and evil.” Another Obiaman, a Thelema Magician gave a much longer answer to the question: “Obia is primal” he said. Explaining further, he continued: “It is the genetic impulse to spirituality. It is the experience of communicating with the subconscious through symbols.” An unexpected sentence followed, “Africans have said that beings from Sirius taught them Obia.” In this twenty-minute conversation, I was told about the infamous Harvard psychology professor Dr. Timothy Leary’s theory of the eight circuit brain. I learnt that there were four basic terrestrial circuits. Obia according to this Obiaman “allows for

communication with information in our DNA from the primal level up. Our DNA has our ancestor code. This is a cognitive scientific fact.”

Obia? This Obia? Were we still talking about the Obia that I grew up hearing about in Jamaica? This Obia – the witchcraft of “iniquity workers” was about ancestor coded DNA? How is it that this Magician made Obia sound like a good thing? DNA and Obia in the same sentence? This sounded stranger than many of the Obia stories I had collected so far. By and large the discourse seemed reasonable. There was after all one mention of “Africa”, and the word “primal” and the word “ancestor”. But apart from these three words, everything sounded European, and academic, and far removed from the Jamaican *Balmyaads* (healing shrines) where people grapple with the “unclean ting and powerful healing” and where people given “nine day fi live” [nine days to live] experience the “higher heights” of spiritual power. This business of unpacking Obia had gotten much much harder. Indeed based on these responses, it seemed that Obia was indeed “high higher science” as the Jamaican Revival healer had told me. This “high higher science” seemed at best to be cognitive, to be primal. After some deliberation, I realized that these responses to the seminal question were not as disparate as they first appeared. Each respondent was describing the same “genetic impulse to spirituality”, they were talking about different aspects of the “cognitive science of religion.”

Outside of academia, this “cognitive science of religion” is referenced variously as the Occult Sciences, Scientific Religion, Spiritual Science and Scientific Illuminism. Within academia, the emergent disciplines of Esotericism, Spiritual Anthropology and the Cognitive Science of Religion are dedicated, to varying degrees, to the study of these practices. As a body of secret knowledge and practice, Occult Science is holistic and engages all aspects of

human experience. Being primal, it is Occult Science that has given birth to the Western academy. Indeed, research into the occult origins of Western academia shows the very notions of degrees and faculties, as well as that of the arts and sciences emerge from occult origins. In *The History of Magic*, Èliphas Levi informs us that “at the beginning, the symbols of religion were those also of science, which were then in concealment” (Levi 2001:374). Accordingly, we have mathematics which was originally theological arithmetic (numerology); alchemy which gave birth to chemistry, and astronomy which is derived from astrology. The very word academy, Greek Ἀκαδημία – Akademia contains within it the essential concept of spirit – “Ka” which the Greeks learnt from Africans - Egyptians. Likewise, we have recorded in their own history book -- the Bible, the fact that the Hebrews also obtained their Kabbalah from the Egyptians.² Spirit as in Egyptian *Ka* or Igbo *Chi* is therefore the conceptual foundation our modern academy (academy). It is no surprise to find that Egypt is the cradleland for the Western academy because “it is in Egypt that Magic attains the grade of completion as a universal science and is formulated as a perfect doctrine” (Levi 2001:79). It is this “perfect doctrine”, this Kabbalah or received knowledge, this primal Obia which becomes re-veiled in the academies of the Jews and the Greeks.

The first academy in the Western sense was Plato’s school of philosophy founded circa 385 BC at Akademia, which was a sanctuary of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and skill. From the notions of wisdom and skill emerged the Arts and the Sciences. Seven subjects were taught in Plato’s academy. These subjects namely, “grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy -were considered a unity. They were divided into two parts: the trivium of grammar, rhetoric and logic; and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy” (Worrel 2002). Yet as Marion Montgomery notes in *The*

Truth of Things “we find ourselves a long way from Plato” (1999:12). Arguing for a “Recovery of Reality” within the Liberal Arts, Montgomery laments the fact that the modern academy is in collapse; as having abandoned its “metaphysical vision” (200), it presents a false understanding of the intellect. This abandonment of the metaphysical vision; the failure to treat seriously our genetic impulse to spirituality means that terms such as “Esotericism”, “Occult”, “Magic”, “Spirit” and “Obia” are pejorative terms in today’s academy. Columbia University ethnomusicologist Professor Kenneth Bilby, author of “The Strange Career of Obeah” cautioned me on this matter: “I would be careful about using the word “Obia” to describe the Caribbean’s African-derived religions”, he said, “because the word “Obia” has the power to cause problems...by detracting from a good theory.”³

While acknowledging that the word “Obia has the power to cause problems”, this scholarship advances a Cognitive Theology of Obia which argues for a rethinking of Obia as Divine Knowledge and Wisdom and the priestly class of Obia practitioners as Gnostic Revelers. Central to this Cognitive Theology is a focus on the Niger Delta etyma *Obia* and *Abiama (Chukwu)* as continental African antecedents for the West Indian term Obia. The Igbo word *Obia* defines an itinerant *Dibia* or holistic Doctor while *Abiama (Chukwu)* references God in the capacity of “the wisdom and knowledge which reveals himself” (Umeh 1997:i), The Akan cognates *Krabea (intellectual gift)*; *Hybea (destiny)*; *Obibini (African/Black person)*; and *Obi (somebody/person)*, as well as BaKongo *sala bilongo* (“working Obia”) and *Nzambi (God)* are privileged as conceptually similar etyma for Obia. These ethnic African cognates are used to explore the theological foundations of Obia. I advance a theory of JamAfrican Obia as pan-human universal religion, and offer the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church (JOCC)⁴ as a Healing Mission grounded in holistic healthcare. This Theology of Obia builds on more recent

conceptions of Obia as neutral mystical power (Stewart 2005b) and an agent of healing and protection (Johnston 1910; Brathwaite 1974a; Handler and Bilby 2001) to posit a reconception of Obia as primal will or universal mind, in Jungian gnosis, the psyche. In this conceptualization, the noun Obia references both the Obia practitioner as Gnostic Revealer and the body of revealed knowledge. “Working Obia” defines the techniques, rituals and activities attendant to the acquisition and use of revealed knowledge.

Caribbean Culture Theories

When I asked a Modda V, a Revival healer about Obia, Jamaica’s “cognitive science of religion”, her response was “everybody desperate for the Spirit!” We were thirty minutes into our discussion when I posed the seminal question. Modda continued, “Ah telling dem dat it’s better to walk Christ-like dan to have di Spirit. But everybody waan Spirit, having di Spirit give dem heights and fame.”⁵ It was 7:00 pm on a warm April evening and we are sitting on the veranda of her *balmyaad* one week after final rites had been performed in a *Thanksgiving Duty* for a young female convert. At this poignant moment in the conversation, Modda gives voice to local wisdom: Despite the orthodox Christian discourse, people generally believe that It is better to be empowered, that is, to “have Spirit”, than to be Christian (orthodox/exoteric). While the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the comment indicates the failure of exoteric Christianity to satisfy the spiritual needs of the majority. Here, on Revival ground, a microcosm of the larger society, the spirit reigns and rules in the average Jamaican’s ongoing attempt to achieve “heights and fame.” It is of no small consequence that some 412 years after the first enslaved Africans arrived in Jamaica, Martha Beckwith in walking the *Black Roadways* of JamAfrica observed that “the Jamaican Negro...believes with all his might in the spirit world, sometimes to his degradation but at

times also to his supreme exaltation” (1929:10). This spiritual worldview is no less than a vision of the cosmos as engendered, populated and harmonized by Spirit; it is the cognitive impulse, the human ideal and the religious instinct.

This scholarship on *Gnostic Obia from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari* represents early steps toward a theory of Obia traditions in Jamaica and the Caribbean. I posit that the most fruitful exploration of Obia in the Caribbean begins with a focus on the cognitive orientations (worldviews) of the enslaved Africans and their descendants. Apart from positing a unidirectional flow of “cultural erasure”, the traditional attention to phenomena such as material culture, ritual and musical forms as a means of discovering discrete “retentions”, only addresses the manifestations of cognitive orientations, or surface forms of a culture. The superficiality of these surface forms is seen their diversity and greater susceptibility to change. Further, attention to discrete forms also fails to account for cultures which do not exhibit distinct “Africanisms.” Attention to cognitive orientations allows for the unification of isolated cultural retentions, and accordingly fosters a more holistic and comprehensive account of JamAfrican and Caribbean socio-cultural and religious traditions.

Of the early theorists, it is Herskovits, the pioneering anthropologist in New World African culture, whose scholarship has been especially important. His theory of acculturation which sought to banish *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1939) conflicted with other theorists such as Frazier (1939) who, using a functionalist or synchronic approach (as opposed to a historical one), articulated a “creativity hypothesis.” This argument for a culture of innovations and creations based on the premise that the horrors of enslavement so traumatized Africans that “cultural heritage was impossible,” has long been disproved. Herskovits’ acculturation model, which viewed West Africa as a “culture area”, posited retentions/survivals,

reinterpretations, syncretisms and reintegrations as essential features of cultural contact, change and continuity. These creations then, which formed a part of this model, were not seen as pure innovations, but rather as changes derived from a common African base. One major critique of the acculturation theory is that it implies an inferiority of African cultures which must acculturate upwards in a single direction towards superior European cultures. This model does not account for the mutuality, if unevenness, of cultural integration. Such a theory, while accounting for aspects of motivation, demography and location, fails to incorporate important social, economic, ecological and political factors. The search for isolated carryovers may therefore lead to superficial and unnecessary ascriptions which can better be explained by context.

Noting that many culture traits described as “retentions” are really functional parallelisms, Smith shows that land tenureship in the Caribbean is informed more by “the pressure of certain measurable conditions such as migration, population increase, death-order of spouses, and the like” (1960:42), than by the persistence of African cultural traditions. The quest to map discrete carry-overs to particular cultural groups is also complicated by demographic and time factors. Dominance of a particular group, newness, of certain practices, salience of particular concepts impacted the adoptions of aspects of culture. Its adoption wholesale may have transformed it, making it unrecognizable and/or representative of more than one culture group. Two examples can be offered: The use of marijuana by the Rastafari has generally been imputed to East Indian influences. Yet, as Bilby (1985) argues, this “Holy Herb” was Kongo Tobacco before it was Ganja. Rastafari is strongly influenced by both Kumina and East Indian mysticism; and although Kumina practitioners came to Jamaica in 1841, some twenty-six years before the East Indians who arrived in 1867,

Rastafari did not emerge as a new religion until 1933. How does acculturation account for the ritual use of Cannabis in this new religion? Further, the use of water in Revivalism, to the extent that it is African, can only be referenced as “African” in a general sense. The use of water as a ritual substance is ubiquitous throughout Africa and when transplanted in Caribbean bears the stamp of cultural mixing. For example, the Guyanese “Comfa” tradition in which “Mami Wata” is worshipped has an Akan name but its practices are clearly based on Congolese ritual practice, while the phrase “Mami Wata” may be said to bear the distinctive languaging of the Nigerian Yoruba. At the same time, water symbolism is an integral part of European and Asian religions. In this case, the use of water can be said to be syncretic. These examples show both the usefulness and the limits of the acculturation theory.

Current theories of Caribbean culture include Hybridity, Pluralism, Chaos, Callaloo Culture, and Creolization, and tend to arise relatively frequently as scholars try to define the complexity of culture in the Caribbean. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini Gebert (2003) offer that creolization, defined as “the ongoing and ever-changing process (not the static result) of new forms born or developed from the interaction of peoples and forces due to adaptive processes omnipresent and irresistible in the Americas” (6); and syncretism “another form of empowerment, another modality of revision and popular resistance” (ibid) best characterize Africa-derived religions as domains of culture. In *The Repeating Island*, Benitez-Rojo notes the plantation as the only constant in the diverse and heterogeneous complexity defined as Caribbean culture. Benitez-Rojo also offers “Three Words toward Creolization,” stating that it is “not merely a process (a word that implies forward movement) but a discontinuous series of recurrences, of happenings, whose sole law is change” (1998:55). Enslaved Africans worked ceaselessly towards change and this change is exemplified and

signified by Obia “is the art of causing change in existing phenomena” (Crowley 2002:39). This “ongoing and ever-changing process” of creolization, of Obia, is also properly seen as a mode of transculturation.

The theory of “transculturation” (Ortiz 1984) is generally considered important for its emphasis on inclusiveness as a way to legitimize all cultures of the Caribbean region. Instead of positing a unidirectional flow of culture away from inferior bases, “transculturation” articulates the “creative, ongoing process of appropriation, revision and survival leading to the mutual transformation of two or more pre-existing cultures into a new one” (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini Gebert: 2003:6). This mutual transformation of pre-existing cultures has long been seen as informed by the belief systems of the peoples effecting the change. Arguing for the need to see cultural practices of Africans in the New World as only one (inadequate) avenue to understanding Afro-Caribbean culture, Mintz and Price (1939) reject Herskovits’ concept of West Africa as a “culture area.” Instead they posit the unity of West African cultures at the level of cognitive orientation, values, philosophical assumptions and phenomenology. Like the creolization and transculturation theories, the argument for the attention to worldview privileges the African’s ability for survival, creative resistance and diplomatic adaptation as well as construction/transformation of Euro-American culture.

Cognitive linguists argue that there is an important interrelation between worldview and language (Hill and Mannheim 1992; Holland and Quinn 1987; Kay and Kempton. 1984). Recent debates on linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism admit to the problematique of separating linguistic from non-linguistic phenomenon and concede that language is properly conceived as thought, and that language and worldview mutually influence each other. In *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*, Gentner and

Goldin-Meadow (2003) argue that the relationship between language and thought/worldview can be expressed as three interrelated concepts, namely; language as category maker, language as tool kit and, language as lens. In the first instance, language as category maker, language is seen as an important influence on how we classify and where we differentiate between categories. Accordingly, language can help us appreciate groupings in the world that we might not have otherwise grasped. Secondly, language is seen as providing us with tools that enlarge our representation and reasoning capacities. In this formulation, language as tool kit, words and signs are seen as directing the mental processes which relate to concept formation. Finally, the notation of language as lens is a recognition that language influences the way we see the world.

This threefold conceptualization of the relationship between language and worldview helps us to better understand the word “Obia” as an enduring signifier for the processes of transculturation, creolization and religious adaptation in Caribbean societies. As a signifier for African religion and culture in the English-speaking Caribbean, the term “Obia” defines the Spirit of transformation and healing as both a “contradictory omen” (Brathwaite 1974) of chaos and an “organized and concentrated attempt to impose our Will on certain parts of the Cosmos” (Crowley 2002:39). The impetus towards change is informed by the phenomenal experience of Spirit, by Obia soteriology, and by holistic knowledge of visible and invisible essences. Change in JamAfrica was grounded in African Cognitive Sciences and exemplified in the healing knowledge and practices of Obia practitioners. This holistic knowledge defied European definition even as attempts to define it changed its meaning. In seeking to “capture the worldview” of JamAfricans, the *literati* catalogued the enslaved

African's ability to use holistic knowledge as a means of resistance, survival and adaptation. They recorded the primal urge of the oppressed to change their environment.

Earliest Records and Literary Definitions of *Obia*:

On January 1, 1761, "An Act to remedy the evils arising from irregular assemblies of slaves" went into effect in Jamaica. In the previous month, December 1760, the slavocracy enacted the earliest law in the British West Indies to include a provision which explicitly addressed the "many and great dangers" arising from the presence of Obeah Men and Women on "many estates and plantations" (Handler 2010).⁶ The wording of this law, enacted some six months after the Tacky Rebellion which involved over 1,000 slaves, was a deliberate attempt to counter the power wielded by Obeah practitioners. "Obeah Men and Obeah Women" were said to have an undue "influence over the minds of their fellow slaves," such influence which was "destructive to the peace and welfare of this island" (Handler 2010). It is within this context of resistance and rebellion that the continental African word "*Obia*" becomes literized as "Obeah" by British colonists in the island of Jamaica.

And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes, going under the Appellation of Obeah Men and Women, pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil spirits, whereby the weak and superstitious are deluded into a Belief of their having full Power to exempt them, whilst under their Protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen. (Acts of Assembly, Clause X, Act 24: 1760)

Clause X of the Acts of Assembly is the very first attempt to define *Obia* by the Jamaican slavocracy. This first Obeah Act criminalized "the wicked Art of Negroes" called "Obeah Men and Obeah Women"; but the apparent vagueness of the definition has led to centuries of conjecture, misinterpretations and the deliberate as well as unconscious demonization of this "Art of Negroes." This is reflected in the fact that some 142 years after

this first rendering of Obia, Ralph Caine, on visiting Jamaica felt pressed to ask: “What is this Obi or Obeah, which after more than a century’s Christianizing effort lurks behind every pledge of faith, and against which no legislation can prevail? (Caine 1908:124) Some one hundred years after Caine, at the first ever Obeah Conference in Newcastle, UK (July 2008), the answer to this seminal question only produced more vagueness: “it’s complex,” “it’s a signifier,” was the common refrain. For over two hundred and fifty years, the Western world has been captivated by a phenomenon which defies definition.

While the 1760 Obeah Act represents the first attempt to define the term, the earliest record of the term occurs in a 1731 letter of Colonel Campbell who led the war against the “Rebellious Negroes” of Port Antonio. On January 23, 1731, Governor Hunter’s communication to the Duke of Newcastle included an “Extract of Col. Campbell’s letter of the examination of some rebellious negros lately taken” (Headlam 1938:25) which reports that “the wife of the chief Obra [sic] man promises to shew the town and great cave where they send their women and children to, when any party comes upon them” (ibid). The second record in 1743 relates to the Accompong or Leeward Maroons who were said to have “a person whom they called Obea Man whom they greatly revered” (Kopytoff 1973:83), and whose “obeah man” was said to be in disrepute for failing to foresee the British attack which destroyed their town (87). The third mention of Obia by the slavocracy is the aforementioned Clause X of Acts of Assembly, after which the planter Edward Long (1776) gives the first extended report of the activities of Obia practitioners.

Edward Long reports that “the most sensible among them fear the supernatural powers of the African Obeah men, or pretended conjurers” (Long 1776:416). He notes further that “some of these execrable wretches [Obia men] in Jamaica introduced what they called

the *myal dance*, and established a kind of society, into which they invited all they could. The lure hung out was that every Negroe initiated into the myal society would be invulnerable by the white men” (Long 1774: 416-417). Speaking particularly of the “the Negroes who pass under this general description of [Coromantins]...brought from the Gold Coast,” Long reports that:

Their priests, or obeah-men, are their chief oracles in all weighty affairs, whether of peace, war, or the pursuit of revenge. When assembled for the purposes of conspiracy, the obeah-man, after various ceremonies, draws a little blood from every one present; this is mixed in a bowl with gunpowder and grave dirt; the fish or oath is administered, by which they solemnly pledge themselves to inviolable secrecy, fidelity to their chiefs, and to wage perpetual war against their enemies; as a ratification of their sincerity, each person takes a cup of the mixture, and this finished the solemn rite. Few of them have ever been known to violate this oath, or to desist from the full execution of it. (473)

It is important to note that Charles Leslie who visited Jamaica in 1740 and gave such graphic reports of the condition of the enslaved Africans makes absolutely no mention of Obia. He only reports witnessing a successful Grave Dirt Oracle used for detecting thieves. With regard to the religion of the negroes he had this to say: “Their Notions of Religion are very inconfitent, and vary according to the different countries they come from: But they have a kind of occafional Conformity, and join without Distinction in their solemn Sacrifices and Gambols” (Leslie 1740:307).

The 1789 *Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to trade and foreign plantations* (Great Britain: 1789 Report)⁷ which covers all the British colonies in the West Indies is attempt by the slavocracy to arrive at a more precise definition and understanding of Obia. The Council was appointed in response to His Majesty’s order “concerning the present state of the trade to Africa, and particularly the trade in slaves” (Edwards 1799: 165). *The 1789 Committee Report* states: “The

term Obeah, Obiah, or Obia (for it is variously written) we conceive to be the adjective, and Obe or Obi the noun substantive; and that by the words Obia men or women, are meant those who pratife Obi” (Edwards 1799: 165). In this *The 1789 Committee Report* which gives the most expansive account of Obia in the West Indies, Jamaican Obia is associated with suicide, poisoning, murder, the protection of fields, and general divination. The etymology of the term is said to be Egyptian “Ob”, “Aub” and/or “Obion” meaning serpent. The Egyptian derivation had “become in Jamaica the general term to denote those Africans who in that island practice witchcraft or sorcery, comprehending also the calss of what are called Myalmen” (Edwards 1799:169).

It is said that “the professors of Obi are, and always were, natives of Africa, and no other” (Edwards 1799:166); and we hear that “Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor them; to these Oracles they resort and with the most implicit Faith, upon all occasions, whether for the Cure of Disorders, the obtaining of Revenge for Injuries or Insults, the conciliating of Favour, the Discovery and Punishment of the Thief or the Adulterer, and the Prediction of Future Events” (ibid). Age, expertise and peculiarity is reported to determine devotion and confidence and a lucrative trade existed in “Obies” or fetishes of various types and classes produced by Obia practitioners. *The 1789 Committee Report* mentions the 1760 Tacky Rebellion and the subsequent law enacted for the suppression and punishment of the “dangerous tendency to Obeah practices” (Edwards 1799:171). It was conceded however that “neither the terror of this law, the strict investigation which has ever since been made after the professors of Obi, nor the many examples of those who from time to time have been hanged or transported, have hitherto produced the desired effect” (ibid). Among the conclusions drawn from the evidence was one which expressed the view that, “this sect, like

others in the world, has flourished under persecution” (ibid). The next British report which explicitly addresses Obia practice in Jamaica is the result of the largest rebellion in the post-emancipation era.

The Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 gave rise to the 1866 *Report of the Jamaica Royal Commission*⁸ which sought to ascertain among other things, the role of Obia in the rebellion. It is said of Obia that "it is a twofold art; it is the art of poisoning, combined with the art of imposing upon the credulity of ignorant people, by a pretence of witchcraft" (Williams 1932:195) We hear further that "its effects are produced by poisoning. The Obeah men are parties who are acquainted with many of the simples of this country, which are not known, and they administer them with a very pernicious effect" (ibid). Obi men were still being consulted and "their influence is so great that nothing that can be said to the black population can induce the more ignorant of them to question the power of the Obeah man. The people have many superstitions about them, but they are mortally afraid of them" (ibid). In 1894, Thomas Banbury gives a missionary account of Obia, reporting it as "a superstition the most cruel in its intended designs; the most filthy in its practices; the most shameful and degrading in its associations. It has not only directed its baleful influence against popular society in the island at large; but alas! it tends greatly to the pulling down of the Church of Christ (1894: 5). Up to the late nineteenth century, the *literati's* general account of Obia in Jamaica and the West Indies was a largely negative one.

But these negative accounts of Obia are interrupted by Harry Johnston in his observations of *The Negro in the New World*. What he had to say deserves to be quoted in full, especially in light of the fact that this particular rendering of Obia has largely been ignored for the past century.

Obia (misspelt Obeah) seems to be a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the Niger Delta, which simply means “Doctor.” The system embodied in that word (say “medicine”) is, like all European medical practice before the eighteenth century and many of the rites of Christianity in its healing formulae, largely empirical. It is at once fetishism and magic, sorcery, hypnotism, faith healing, thought transference: In short, that royal road to results in a command over natural forces that humanity constantly hopes to achieve. (Johnston 1910:253)

Johnston goes on to state that Obia is informed by “blind guesswork” and “wild supposition” rather than by “patient study of cause and effect, and the employment of the proper physical agencies” (ibid). He nevertheless offers that “in its ‘well-meaning’ forms, it is medical treatment by drugs or suggestion, combined with a worship of the powers of nature and a propitiation of evil spirits: in its bad types it is an attempt to frighten, obsess, and hypnotize, and failing the production of results by this hocus-pocus, to poison” (ibid).

Myal Djumboh Cassecanarie is the only European occultist, to the best of our knowledge, who wrote favorably on West Indian Obia. In his work *Obeah Simplified, The True Wanga!* Cassecanarie does an exemplary job in telling “What It Really Is, And How It Is Done!” Published in both Trinidad and London, this late 19th century work, self-identified as “a scientific but plain treatise” on Obia, defines Obia as a “living, active system of ‘Magic’” (Cassecanarie 1895:3). Writing from Trinidad in 1895, Cassacanarie asserts that “the *Obeah* (meaning killing) or *Wanga* (meaning (a) an Incantation or spell and (b) a mysterious or poisonous drug) cult, is the name of the tribal system of *single* magic of the Popo, Koromantyn, Eboes and other tribes” (1895:1) Further,

Obeah, for the most part is based upon the use of the spell or charm, and some psychical processes mostly in connection therewith; and includes communication with “departed spirits” (Duppies) in a species of mantic phrenzy; the protection of fields and crops by means of glamour and “nature spirits,” some ceremonial magic, the cure and infliction of disease, causing death, and the whole supplemented by a wide knowledge of poisons and other vegetable drugs, &c., &c. (Cassacanarie 1895: 2)

Obeah Simplified is rich with ethnographic material on Spelling, the use of love potions, the charging of objects, the protection of fields and the astral travelling. The work offers examples of the use of Obia in finding lost objects, in astral travelling, in rainmaking, in food making and in the manifestation and use of serpents. Cassacanarie explains further that “the prototype of the Obeahman is that long legged grayish or brownish black (anansi) spider which is generally to be seen carrying around a large white sac with him” (ibid). Cassecanarie understood full well that there was a “problem with Obia.” But after years of researching Obia, Cassecanarie became a “professor of Obia” and unashamedly states: “I confess to the belief in such things myself” (Cassecanaire 1895:56).

In speaking to “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature” Griot Poet Kamau Brathwaite took time out to shed some more light on the principle of Obia. Brathwaite, also a historian, wrote on the “Development of Creole Society in Jamaica” in the pre-emancipation era. Among his conclusions is the notion that “Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean” is best described as “Contradictory Omens.” For Brathwaite, “the principle of *obeah* is, therefore like medical principles everywhere, the process of healing/protection through seeking out the source or explanation of the cause (*obi/evil*) of the disease or fear” (Brathwaite 1974a:75). He critiques the “slave master/missionary/Prospero assumption inherited by most of us, that obeah deals *in evil*” (ibid). Noting that in the debasing of Obia, “not only has African science been discredited, but Afro-Caribbean religion has been negatively fragmented and almost (with exception in Haiti and Brazil) publicly destroyed” (ibid). The Griot ends by advocating that “to properly understand *obeah*, therefore, we shall have to restore it to its proper place in the Afri/American communion complex: *kumina-custom-myal-obeah-fetish*” (ibid).

Interdisciplinary ethnomusicologist Kenneth Bilby took Kamau Brathwaite seriously and in seeking to find Obia's "proper place in the Afri/American communion complex" was led to chart "The Strange Career of Obeah". In essence, he found that Obia's "strange career" showed a negative movement from a concept of knowledge, healing and protection to one of harmful or evil magic. His recent expositions of Obia have been co-authored with historian Jerome Handler. Together, they posit Barbados as the most likely place of origin for the term in the West Indies and define Obeah as "Healing and Protection" originating in "West Indian Slave Life." In tracing the lexical roots of Obia, Handler and Bilby (2001) argue that the Efik/Igbo term *Dibia* provides the most compelling phonological and semantic approximation of *Obia*. Bilby and Handler suggest that because *Obia* "occurs most often as part of a compound term *dibia*, which is a contraction of two words, *di* and *abia*... [it] is not readily recognizable to non-speakers of the language when it occurs in this common contraction, [and] may help to explain why so few etymological searches have taken note of it" (2001:91).

Handler and Bilby propose that the English morpheme *man* is easily added to the etymon *abia* for the coining of a new Igbo-English term *Obia-man* meaning "a man of knowledge and wisdom." For them, "the Igbo word *abia* would seem to constitute a much more persuasive etymology for 'Obeah' than all the previously posited African terms" (2001:92). Further, they note that "the phonetic values of the vowels represented by the letters 'a' and 'o' (in *abia* and *obia*) are most likely fairly close." As such,

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'. (2001:97)

Bilby and Handler (2004:154) who argue for a positive reinterpretation of *Obia* posit that the phenomenon “encompasses a wide variety and range of beliefs and practices related to the control or channeling of supernatural/spiritual forces.” They argue that “*Obia* is not organized religion” because “it lacks a more or less unified system of beliefs and practices involving, for example deities or gods, communal or public rituals and ceremonies and the physical spaces or sites where they occur, or spiritual leaders of congregations/congregants” (Ibid: 153-154).

Religion scholar Dianne Stewart, who like Bilby and Handler posits a more nuanced reading of *Obia*, argues that it is simultaneously a religious practice and a “protean institutional structure encompassing ethnic African and pan-African religious cultures which coauthored an African-derived understanding of mystical power as the capacity to use energy dynamically” (Stewart 2005b:90-91). This dynamic use of energy, affirms Spirit as the foundational code of JamAfrican religions. It provided for both individual and communal ritual and ceremonies, that were generally kept secret, but which in the course of time became more public and hence observable by the slavocracy. Stewart’s work is important for highlighting the fact that in the pre-emancipation literature *Myal* is always described within the context of *Obia*. Equally significant are her findings of eight varying but related definitions of *Obia* namely, the ritual negotiation of invisible and visible forces; evil magic/witchcraft; poison; a religious institution; divination; herbalism; neutral mystical power; and specialized religious knowledge for the priesthood. These descriptions suggest as Stewart argues that *Obia* constituted a form of priesthood with religious offices of Spiritualists such as mediums, diviners and diverse types of experts. In particular, the description of *Obia* as a religious institution with foundational cosmologies, philosophy,

theology, iconography, ritual life and language, as well as particular text (Stewart 2005b) equate with traditional Igbo spirituality and the title/office of the *Ndibia*.

Dibia Professor John Umeh in speaking to *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area* cites the Caribbean and the Americas as Igbo Diasporas. His reason for extending the Igbo Diaspora to the New World is not simply the comparatively large numbers of Biafran Africans who came to be enslaved in the New World, but rather the establishment of Obia Missions by knowledge experts or holistic healers called *Ndibia*. Umeh affirms that

The Igbo *Dibia* [holistic Doctor] established in the Caribbeans [sic] (and America) as *Obia* man (spelt “obeah” by the English); *Obia* being Igbo name for a *Dibia* who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands. When an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* profession in another land or society. (Umeh 1999b: 28)

Umeh asserts that *Dibia* who came to the Caribbean and America on Obia, did so not by slave ships, but by mystical travel. He cites these Obia Missions as common *Dibia* practice from “very ancient times when *Dibia* vast in the knowledge and practice of mystic travellings of *ikwu ekili* or *ikwu eli* or *ide nde* or *ibi ibuo* went to various parts of the world to provide services to suffering humanity” (Ibid: 28). Mystical travellings are achieved by the power of *Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge in his savior role as a Cosmic Kite. *Agwu* is the emissary of the Supreme Being *Chukwu Abiama*, the Wisdom and Knowledge who reveals himself. It is so that the *Dibia* asserts that “what does things for us comes from the Supreme Spirit.”

Possession by *Agwu* the Holy Spirit is necessary for one to become a *Dibia* or expert in Knowledge and Wisdom. Further, the *Dibia*'s connection to *Agwu* is so special that *Agwu* will often bless the *Dibia* with “complete possession that he or she virtually becomes *Agwu*” (Umeh 1997: 78). When such complete possession occurs, the *Dibia* “speaks the voice of the Holy Spirit, thinks the thoughts of the Holy Spirit, performs the skills, miracles and the feats

of Agwu the Holy Spirit, sees with the vision of the Holy Spirit and hears with the divine ears of the Holy Spirit” (ibid). *Nne Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge therefore has a special place within Igbo epistemology, cosmology and religion. This significant role of the possessing Holy Spirit of Knowledge was established in JamAfrica as “Working the Spirit”. JamAfrican spiritualists often describe their calling as a Duty to the Spirit; they sometimes infer that they are under Orders from The Spirit. Within the Jamaican plantation society, Obia which retained its Igbo conceptual base was reinforced by the Congolese Holy Spirit of Knowledge called *Myal*. As a Maroon Obia practitioner affirmed in 1939, “You learn obeah from mial” (Bilby 1993:64). From these select attempts to define Obia, we find that in its original conceptualization, Obia is a holistic healing principle grounded in Esoteric African Spiritual Knowledge. It is no wonder then, that Obia has remained an enigma in the New World and that in Jamaica “everybody desperate for the Spirit.”

Working the Spirit: Oral Accounts of Obia

“Everybody desperate for the Spirit!” says Modda V and this desperation for the Spirit is reinforced by a continued deference for Spiritualists and Spiritual Powers. This Spiritual worldview expressed in Igboan terms reveals an understanding that “the Spirits and human beings are in constant communication/exchanges but the uninitiated does not know” (Umeh 1997:2). Accordingly, the Spirit Quest of JamAfricans may be seen as attempt to be *Dibia*, an expert in Knowledge and Wisdom for “one sees the Spirit through the *Dibias’* eyes” (Ibid: 136). These men and women, considered the “wisest of the wise”, are “blessed with special attributes, abilities and faculties” (ibid: i); their Medicine is called *Ogwu* – “the ultimate solution”; and the only limit to their power is interference with destiny. The aphorism *Dibia aha-agwo Onatalu Chi* meaning “*Dibia* does not cure or solve fate or destiny

(ibid: 86) expresses the vastness of *Dibia's* power and explains why Igbo society is divided in *Dibia* and *Ofeke* (non-*Dibia* /uninitiated). It also explains the desperation for the Spirit as a means to “heights and fame” and why “working the Spirit” is a recurring feature in Jamaica’s African-derived religions.

The ability to “see the Spirit” is referenced as being “four-eyed” or being “Spiritual.” The Jamaican *balmyaad* is the domain of “four-eye people” and in these healing shrines, the spirit talks as much as it is talked (about). During my brief sojourn at Modda V’s *balmyaad* or “Spirit Yaad” I could not miss the salience of spirit for these Revivalists. In discourse with patients, church members, family members, congregants and the matriarch herself “spirit phrases” dominated each exchange. Modda tells me that young Keisha had been “slain the spirit” for 40 days. She had received “gifts of the spirit” including healing and “spirit writing.” Keisha’s “journeying in the spirit” had created “spiritual jealousy” although other members had gifts such as “discernment of spirits” and singing. There is “spiritual selfishness” on the part of renowned spiritualists who “die wid dem hand lock” leaving behind nothing more than their reputation and a desperate longing on the part of their converts for the knowledge and expertise taken to the grave. A new convert is considered to be “young in the spirit” and disobedient persons may get a “spiritual lash” to help straighten their crooked paths. The unsuspecting and/or unguarded are susceptible to “spiritual blow”, “spirit attack” and “spiritual sickness”, while retribution and punishment by the supreme being is referred to as “God-sick.” All of these are cured through “spiritual remedy” always on “spirit time.” At one point in her treatise on obeah and “spiritual wickedness,” Modda agitatedly invites me to see come with her to see a “spiritual surgeon.”

This “spiritual doctor” extracts manifestations of obeah such as nails, and other metal objects, as well as life forms such as frogs and lizards.

“Spirit Stories” – stories of “spiritual affliction”, “spirit encounters” and “spiritual victory” abound as testament to the vitality of spirits. In a lively discussion before healing service one Wednesday evening, a young female recited the story of how her sister who “have belly” (spiritual impregnation)⁹ was being cured by a famous Revival pastor. Another woman spoke of seeing a group of animals including rats marching towards her bedroom- she had to rush to the door to “stand guard” and “plead di blood of Jesus”¹⁰ to rebuke them. An elderly woman complemented this story by offering that she had to run out of her house one evening as a mongoose walked straight into her living room as she watching TV. She states that the mongoose looked her straight in the eye, standing upright and when she reached for the cutlass, it attacked her. She had to rush from the house in “fear and trembling.” She was not surprised by these events as the night before “fallen angels” had appeared outside the house. Such events were only two in a series of episodes later confirmed to be her neighbor “working Obia” against her.

Modda V who defines Obia as both the “unclean thing and powerful healing” told me how some duppies had been sent from Clarendon by two Obia men to help her out in a case. Modda declares that she does not “deal in Obia.” “I nuh ina di duppy business really”, she says, “demons and spirit ah different ting from God ting.” Upon being summoned by the duppies to the back of the house, she promptly told them that she did not need their help. She offered them some food which they ate and subsequently went back from whence they came. Spirit messengers, usually biblical prophets and saints as well as ancestors, form part of the community of support. Their main purpose is to gather and supply information and

they are a powerful and readily available source of knowledge for practitioners. A prominent female church member took care to explain to me the difference between Sixty-one (1861) and Sixty (1860) Revival, making sure that I understood that there were “deeper depths and higher heights” in the religion. Encounters with spirits and stories of healing are common place events which reveal that Obia, Balm-healing and Revivalism are intricately linked and mutually supportive. These associations are indicative of the “communion complex” which Brathwaite proposes is imperative for a proper understanding of Obia.

To the question, “what is a spirit?” answers were readily available. “Yuh nuh know duppy?” is the general reply followed by a list of other spiritual entities including “demons”, “rolling calf,” “fallen angels” and spirit beings such as messengers and journey men, which include Jesus and Miriam. “Seeing duppy” is a frequent occurrence. When persons speak of seeing their departed loved ones, they call them by name; unknown spirits in human form are considered to be malevolent and are referred to as duppies (ghosts). Accordingly, within the realm of ancestral support/protection, one woman’s grandfather is another woman’s duppy. Conversely, when asked “what is The Spirit?” the response is much slower, more deliberated often producing the response, “ah can’t explain it; you have to experience it for yusef.” According to an elderly woman, who expressed shock and pity at my negative response to the question of whether I experienced The Spirit;

It kinda hard to explain—like I sit here now and di Spirit give mi a touch? And I just feel my body move and the Spirit speak expressly... But you yourself would have to receive the Holy Ghost for yourself to know what is the feeling of the Holy Ghost.

Modda V’s’ response to the question of what is The Spirit; was delivered with customary eloquence “Ah girl,” she sighs, “faith... is like di breeze- dats Spirit – nuh matter how yuh see di tree big and di branch dem big – di breeze move it. So yuh live by faith – di Spirit...” Spirit

is therefore conceived of as active force—as the power that moves things. “Living by the spirit”, then empowers the individual “move things.” The significance of Faith as Spiritual Knowledge was expressed by de Laurence who affirmed that the only requirement for magic was “*a strong faith* in the omnipotent power of all good” (1939:404). For him, “true magic power consists in true faith, but true faith rests in spiritual knowledge, and without that kind of knowledge there can be no faith” (ibid). Living by The Spirit or Spiritual Knowledge/Faith therefore empowers one to “heights and fame”; to the “higher heights” and “deeper depths” of human experience which the positive experience of Spirit as liberating and elevating. Within the Jamaican Obia complex, “Working the Spirit” is the phrase used to express the use of spiritual energy to transform (move) things.

Jamaica is a place where spirit is worked continuously. It is a place where for spiritual people it is always spirit time. The Spirit is – healer, friend, afflicter, foe; the Spirit walks; lick yuh down, pick yuh up; spirits create, destroy, heal, afflict, disempower and empower. But more than anything thing else, the spirit is – a vital part of life, of culture, of worldview. In Jamaica as in many parts of the Diaspora, spirit time is real time, because Spirit is real. In this island space, spirit beings, spirit entities, spiritual forces, spiritual essences all co-exist in a this-worldly reality; with religiosity defined by the persistent quest for Spiritual empowerment.

Given Jamaica’s long association with the Atlantic world, its geo-political designation, and its tourism and music industries, its outstanding performance in sports and beauty industries and its reputation as the mecca of the Caribbean; the widespread belief in spirits across the socio-economic, racial and religious fabric of Jamaican life, seem to many to be “out of place.” Yet, Jamaica was [many say is] home to over 700,000 (of an estimated

fifteen million) enslaved Africans, and what has become Jamaican bears the undeniable stamp of African experience. Within this context, the reality of Spirits can never be successfully challenged. We can however, contemplate manifestations of Spirit, explore Spirit discourse, study Spirit rituals/ practices, and theorize the continued salience of Spirits as well as the high transmissive frequency of Spirit concepts and phenomena. We can take on the challenge of investigating, expounding and theorizing Jamaican Spirit reality. To do so, is to engage with pan-human spirit reality and affirm African spirituality. It is also to understand the legacy of racism as well as the limits of exoteric religion and the etic/popular perspective. It is to affirm as Edith Turner does, that “there *are* spirits, and we have no business contradicting so many good people around the world” (Turner 2006:46). In resisting the urge to contradict and demonize our innate spiritual tendencies, we must ever seek to avoid the politics of language which leads to falsification of spirit reality.

Political Correctness and Historical Context

Our engagement with Obia is informed by a rejection of political correctness. We maintain that Obia scholars must reject political correctness as an impediment to their work. A pandemic named political correctness has seized Western academia by its throat, strangling the very “truth of things”, and enforcing a legion of abstractions which deny reality. Uncomfortable with the fact that race is more than a social construct, that heterosexuality is normative and that gender is biologically determined, academics sit in their uneasy chairs promoting abstract ideologies which fly in the face of common sense and amount to nothing short of an abandonment of reality. Nowhere was this pandemic more evident than at the Obeah Conference in Newcastle, UK in July 2008. Those who sought a definition of Obia were woefully disappointed. Academics sat in their uneasy chairs touting

phrases such as “it’s problematic”, “it’s complex” and “it’s a signifier”. “It” got us nowhere. What was this “it”? But for the conference theme “Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing,” scholars from outside the Caribbean would remain in their exasperated ignorance, none the wiser for having dedicated three days of their time to engage in politically correct abstractions about a “problematic”, “complex”, “signifier” by the name of “it”.

Why is “it” a “problematic” “complex” “signifier”? Because “it” emerged during slavery and the parasitic writings on “it” are almost entirely racist. Why sit in uneasy chairs and use abstractions to address the reality of hate and color prejudice which has and continues to severely and negatively influence the lives of those of the human species called “Blacks” or “Africans”? Why not call “racism” by its proper name “racism” and get on the business of applying academic rigor to Obia? Certainly, this realistic approach is the most fruitful, as proven by the scholarship of Kenneth Bilby, Jerome Handler and Dianne Stewart. Bilby and Handler in defining Obia as healing and protection state the truth of things:

It is hardly surprising that obeah, when filtered through a colonialist and racist lens through documentary evidence, should be seen in exclusively negative terms. European interpretations of obeah were shaped not only by their racist ideologies, ethnocentric religious beliefs, and their own cultural perceptions of witchcraft and sorcery, but also by the limited opportunities they had to gain information. Very few Europeans during the slave era (any more than most modern field workers and scholars) actually witnessed the work of obeah practitioners and such Europeans rarely left accounts of their observations. (Bilby and Handler 2004:156)

What we have in clear language is an acknowledgement that when we engage with the literature on Obia, we are engaging with racist and ethnocentric discourse. Accordingly, our job as scholars is not simply to sit in our uneasy chairs and shy away from this truth of things, but to develop an appropriate methodology or methodologies to adequately address this fact.

For it is a fact that the literature and scholarship on Obia is as racist as it is parasitic (Stewart 2005b); and it is this racist parasite that in true paradoxical manner continues to infect and contaminate every discussion on the JamAfrican healing principle known as Obia.

The racist parasite became entrenched in scholarly discourse by Professor of Anthropology and Jesuit Priest Joseph Williams. It is instructive that Williams, who openly confesses to a failure to secure interviews with subjects of his research; and who in this failing, exacerbates an already flawed anthropology by relying on disillusioned clients to gather “reliable facts”; is considered the traditional authority on Obia by virtue of his two publications *Voodoo and Obeahs* (1932) and *Psychic Phenomenon of Jamaica* (1934). Writing on *Psychic Phenomena in Jamaica*, Joseph Williams admits that

time and again I sought to draw out in conversation the professional Obeah-men, but I invariably found them evasive and non-committal...I closely questioned youngsters [apprentices]...but they had already learned their lesson of secrecy and I could make no impression on them... *It was only from disillusioned clients of Obeah-men who shamefacedly made admissions connected to their own experiences, that I was really able to gather directly any reliable facts.*” (1934:4-5) emphasis mine

To read Williams is to subject oneself to the myopic blindness of racism and misanthropology tempered by only religious intolerance. In the end, William’s consent that “His Satanic majesty is the invisible head of Obeah” (1932:203) amounts to nothing but fanciful imaginings; a theory of Superstition more groundless than the beliefs of his supposed subjects.¹¹ This is the tragedy of the parasitic and derivative scholarship on Obia. Many scholars have caught the “Williams bug”, and thus infected, continue to spread this pandemic, manifesting myriad forms of dis-ease. This disease as Edith Turner notes, forces Africans to turn away from the truth of their own religion (1993). Kenneth Bilby in charting the “The Strange Career of Obeah” informs us that the Maroons, the “original” Obia

practitioners, “firmly deny any knowledge of Obeah, asserting that the word referred to an inherently evil and malicious kind of spiritual power” (1993:2). This assertion proves that “so deeply ingrained has this misinterpretation of the nature of obeah become that it is now accepted to varying degrees by Caribbean peasants themselves, leading many practitioners of what formerly would have been called obeah to abandon the term, realizing that it has been negatively redefined beyond repair (4).

Should we abandon the term Obia? Is it indeed beyond repair? For better or worse, the term is endemic, and its salience and tenacity necessitates some attempt at reparation. Towards this end, we should not reject racist scholarship as totally useless. Williams after all by virtue of the requirements of his discipline, ends up “giving himself away”; even though decades of parasitic scholarship blatantly ignore his mis-anthropology. Yet when we look at Williams’ oeuvre, we see a rigorous attempt to get at some truth about *Africa’s God* (1936). In *Hebrewisms of West Africa: from Nile to Niger with the Jews* (1930), his conclusions are racist, but the text is very rich in source material. His missionary effort *Whisperings of the Caribbean, Reflections of a Missionary* (1925), is likewise racist, but addresses contemporary discourse on Black culture and provides useful information on Anansi stories. *Psychic Phenomenon of Jamaica* so disturbed his sense of reality that he was forced to write about it; admitting that “it is my unhesitating conclusion that there are times in Jamaica when phenomena occur that transcend the forces of Nature and must be attributed to spirit control, which judged from the consequences, are of diabolic origin” (1934:263) emphasis mine. In engaging Williams, we are forced to ask, consequences for whom? What consequences in particular warrant the conclusion that psychic phenomena in Jamaica is of diabolic origin? Williams would have done well to take his own advice by “sifting carefully every word of testimony and testing

out each fact as far as possible. For, it is a time-honoured proverb in Jamaica, “No ebery chain you hear a fe rollen calf,’ meaning, ‘Do not jump to conclusions too hastily’” (1934:263). We affirm also that “ah no ebery fish ina sea a shark” and we will not “throw out the baby with the bathwater”, but we exercise our right to reject racist conclusions and interpretations.

Our approach will be the use of Disposing Intelligence. We will as Jamaicans say “pick sense out of non-sense” not only because of the legacy of racism but also because “the vulgar have come to believe [Obia] ‘Magic’ to mean mere sleight of hand performances, or perhaps conjuring or dealing with the devil, or with the spirits of the dead (de Laurence 1915:394). It is imperative that we both understand and acknowledge the truth of things as they were during the slave era. Those with the best intentions towards Blacks were at best racist. Abolitionists and missionaries supported the ideology that Blacks were inferior to Whites. Even though they advocated for the abolition of slavery, they generally agreed that Blacks were uncivilized savages. This is the truth of things. We therefore reject political correctness. We will not call a bulldozer a spade. Wherever injustice and racism exists, we will call them by their names. In this discourse, we will not polish off the brutality of slavery and the European transatlantic slave trade by the benign phrase “forced migration”, because it is in the context of this very savagery that the drama of Obia unfolds. Racist writers did not employ political correctness in dehumanizing Africans; neither should we in speaking to the fatal hate which doomed millions of our species, and which continues almost unabated in its reign of terror. In a sentence, we admit to “holding Òfó” and we will not apologize for speaking the truth. This is the basic foundation on which we employ the forces of interdisciplinary scholarship in the pursuit of a better understanding of JamAfrican Obia.

Interdisciplinary Approach

An interdisciplinary approach is imperative in framing a comprehensive theory of Obia. Accordingly, in this work, interdisciplinarity is achieved by employing Esotericism, Cognitive Science and Spiritual Anthropology as basic frameworks which incorporate the traditional disciplines of History, Linguistics, Anthropology and Religion to explore Obia as JamAfrican religion. Within the discipline of Anthropology, I utilize the tools of Applied Anthropology and Auto-ethnography to frame an approach best described as applied auto-ethnography. Occult philosophy advocates that every inquiry, every quest for knowledge is journey into self-understanding. Accordingly, as a member of the human race and as a Jamaican national, this exploration of JamAfrican Obia is a phenomenal approach grounded in the experience of Obia. In the words of Paracelsus, the Occultist: “the universities do not teach all things, so a doctor must seek out old wives, gypsies, sorcerers, wandering tribes, and such outlaws and take lessons from them. A doctor must be a traveler. Knowledge is experience” (Paracelsus 1973:160). My experience of Obia is what is commonly called in the esoteric tradition a “journeying in the Spirit”. This journey I define as an extraordinary encounter with the psyche, a cycle of Voices and Visions and Travels which produced an apocalypse – a revelation, re-veiling and re-cognition of Obia.

The legacy of ambivalent shame attached to Obia emerged from the racism attendant to the enslavement of Africans which fostered a discourse which erased God from Diasporean African religious practices. This discourse redefined the African’s communication with God as “communication with the Devil and other evil spirits” (Clause X, Acts of Assembly 1769:55). The academic approach to the study of Obia is mired in hegemonic structures of knowledge engaged in what Montgomery calls a “spiritual revolt”

(Montgomery 1999: 10). This intellectual estrangement within the Western academy coupled with an active racism has produced a parasitic body of scholarship on Obia which consistently demonizes it. In the words of Carl Jung; “the best men in the nation would rather preach dogmatism and platitudes than take the human psyche seriously” (1972:454). This *problématique* therefore forces those who seek to treat Obia seriously to take a non-Western academic approach to the phenomenon. This approach demands new terms of engagement. It requires us to be “Race conscious”. That is, to privilege species over ethnicity and to temper nationalism with pan-humanism. It forces us to take the human psyche seriously, and to acknowledge that “there is spirit stuff” - stuff which is more positive than pathological and more real than metaphor.

This rendering of Obia is therefore written on Spirit Terms, and is guided by my unwavering conviction that “to define what we are unacquainted with is presumptuous ignorance; to affirm positively what one does not know is to lie” (Levi 1896:147). We seek **not** to participate “in kindly pretense”; but instead to take the human psyche seriously and accordingly, to render the truth of things as we find it. In Igbo parlance, we seek to “hold *Òfó*” – to employ the ethics of *Ndibia*. We take you into the Jamaican Balmyaads where Obia is worked daily and give you insight into the spiritual consciousness of those intimately connected and committed to Obia as a Spiritual Power. In this our Anthropology of Consciousness, we in a manner similar to that of Paul Stoller, hold ourselves to “Speaking in the Name of the Real” Obia. We agree with Turner, “it is important at last to find out what this *psi*, this *chi* this *wakan*, this shamanic gift” (Turner 2006:55), this Obia is; and this new “feelwork” requires more inclusive definitions of religion as well as a phenomenal experience of Spirit by Spiritual Anthropologists.

Spiritual Anthropology:

Within the Euro-American academy, spirits have long been exoticized, marginalized and pathologized. The academic attitude towards spirit mirrors Euro-American beliefs in the backward primitiveness of a spirit-centered worldview. This has fostered a largely symbolic approach to Spirit and Spirit phenomena (with a distinct predisposition towards spirit possession), divorced from other aspects of religion and culture, with the corresponding failure to theorize spirit as a conceptual entity. Conversely, gods have maintained their prime position in the hierarchy of spirit beings, maintaining the rigid distinction between the so-called “high religions” and their lesser “folk” counterparts. By and large there has been a tendency for “anthropologists to dismiss, demonize and rationalize away the native claim that spirits exists” (Turner 1993:9). Further, trading in “pseudo-ethnography”, “researchers have perpetuated an endless series of putdowns as regards to the many spirit events in which they have... ‘participated’ in kindly pretense” (ibid). Professing to understand Spirit, researchers have ignorantly and knowingly pathologized sacred and psychic phenomena.

However, in recent times, a more positive approach to spirits has been emerging. We are now experiencing a *spirit-turn* in anthropology, signaling “an attitudinal shift... a shift in ethics, and in the way [anthropologists] approach problem solving” (Schroll and Schwartz 2005:20). This “address[es] the need for an evolutionary transformation in our responsibility toward [spiritual] knowledge and its application”(ibid). Accordingly, the spirit-turn “endeavor[s] to bring spirits back to their rightful place in theories of religion, beside the gods with whom they coexist” (Mageo and Howard 1996:2). Writing in 1993, thirty-nine years after her first fieldwork among the Ndembu of Zambia, and eight years after her most recent visit; Edith Turner in bearing witness to the validity of Ndembu spirit-claims tackled

anthropology's rational approach to the undeniable existence of Spirit. In her seminal article, "The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study," Turner, a pioneer of the spirit-turn, critiques the academy's persistent failure to adequately address the existence of spirits, and argues that "the mission of western anthropologists to explain [spirit] system[s] in positivist terms at all costs... is oddly similar to the self imposed task of the more hidebound religious missionaries who are also sworn to eliminate their hosts' religion" (Turner 1993:10).

Turner's critique of the academy's civilizing mission, while applicable in general, is particularly valid for the Caribbean, where local religions continue to be demonized and marginalized. As Turner observes, there is a "pitiful... tendency of anthropologists from among the Native peoples themselves to defer to the western view and accordingly draw back from claiming the truth of their own religion" (Turner 1993:10). Indeed, because of missionaries, anthropologists, and the slavocracy, there are few "professed" Obia practitioners in Jamaica today. As noted earlier, Obia is a bad word, with every mention of it tainted by the "civilizing mission". Many have abandoned both the terminology and the practice, while others practice Obia under the mask of Christianity. Either ignorant or ashamed of the liberating spirituality of the early Native Baptists, modern day black Baptist preachers trumpet from the pulpits of academia that the "Pluralism and Particularities in Caribbean Theological Reality" evidences an urgent need for "Sorting Out Spirituality in Jamaica" (Jennings 1994). This prejudice against JamAfricans who "worship in spirit and in truth" and who need to "sort out their spirituality" is attended by orthodox Christianity's failure to effectively transform the lives of oppressed poor and marginalized (Lowe-Chin 1991). This admitted "lack of serious concrete engagement" with the spirituality of Caribbean blacks by local anthropologists and religious studies scholar alike attests to the fact that

“nowhere has Christianity been more effectively used as an instrument for the dehistoricization and depoliticization of people than in the Caribbean Basin” (Smith 1988:29).

The civilizing mission in anthropology has resulted in inadequate theorizing, flawed generalizations and partial understandings of the Caribbean’s African-derived religions; accompanied by a culture of apology for things African. This spiritual neglect represents a failure on the part of theorists in the region to 1) affirm the humanity and dignity of peoples of African descent; 2) renounce the persistent anthropological poverty which plagues the Caribbean Blacks; 3) privilege African spirituality and 4) decolonize and emancipate theory and theology. As Turner observes, this amounts to academia “trying to castrate out of [Natives] that human biological gift for spirit things, which they love passionately and have a human right to retain without the weight of our academia upon them with our hints and insinuations” (Turner 2006: 51). She argues for a break in the force field of religious frigidity that prevents anthropologists from seeing what Natives see; for a breaking down the barriers which prevent ethnographers from seeing spirits.

Scholars of the “spirit persuasion” within and without the Caribbean, argue for the primary place of spirits as real beings among the human community. In offering that our “tendency toward religion is inborn, an endowment, a biological predisposition, a propensity, existing for just such a purpose, the communication with spirits” (Turner 2006:55), Turner invokes the cognitive paradigm which advances the naturalness of religion, gods and spirits. This new anthropology of consciousness is self-conscious; it is both “feel” work and field work; as methodology, it argues for sympathetic empiricism, for *communitas*, for cosmological and transcendental gnosis, and demands that theory be informed by experience and not solely by theory. Accordingly, Spiritual Anthropology is defined by “the

anthropologists of consciousness and religion [who] are often right *inside* their subjects' own experiences, and [whose] publications show it" (Turner 2006:34). The discipline is characterized by anthropologists who "have had to shift our own invisible, real spiritual life and what we know of that of others into a position to the front and have it working *in us*, so that we fully know the material of our fieldwork. We've then written this material, intimately" (2006:34). Spiritual Anthropology is informed by ethnographers who are out in the field, "testing spirituality on their own pulses—in real human fieldwork, and finding real *psi*" (2006:44) while coming to the realization that *Onye nyobe Mmuo Ofu Chi ya*, "whoever pries into the Supreme Spirit, will at the end see his/her *Chi*" (Umeh 1997:26, 36).

It is our work to find out what this *Obia*, this *psi* or this *chi* is; and yes, "we do indeed need to get close to it to know it" (Turner 2006:54), and know that "[we] are the knowledge of [our] inquiry." To this extent, spiritual anthropological fieldwork is always an auto-ethnography which represents the "ability to transcend everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life" (Reed-Donahay 1997:4). Auto/ethnography as transcendence constitutes an alternative vision. It is a

self-representation by trained anthropologists that includes a critique of privileged points of view from the outside and which incorporates a resistance to structures of knowledge as power. This position is one that always recognizes the multiplicity of identities inhabited by the auto/ethnographer, the person who is simultaneously and always already not only a native, not simply an ethnographer, and not innocently native. (Panourgia 2000:552)

A traditional non-interdisciplinary academic approach to the study of *Obia* is therefore to accept hegemonic structures of knowledge that "dismiss, demonize and rationalize away the native claim that spirits exists" (Turner 1993:9). Spiritual Anthropology's argument for a

more phenomenal account of Spirit is supported by the interdisciplinary approach of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR).

The Cognitive Science of Religion

As an objective interdisciplinary science, the Cognitive Science of Religion has been important for “seeking principles which are general, and therefore, apply without special privileges to all religious phenomena in all places and at all times” (Lawson and McCauley 1993:20). This pan-human, pan-cultural approach to religion redefined as “any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to supernatural agency” is important for cleansing academia of the “disease of otherness” which has rendered it a partner in spirit thievery¹² and spirit eradication. In acknowledging that “rather than culture providing the explanatory categories for human behavior, culture is itself at least partially in need of explanation by non-cultural, that is cognitive categories” (Lawson 1993:191); the CSR has in turn produced valuable insights not only on the reality of spirits and their relation to mind and gnosis, but also on their naturalness and the naturalness of the rituals and practices associated with them.

The Cognitive Science of Religion posits that “spirits and gods are agents with mental states, desires, motivations, and dispositions that drive their behavior” (Cohen 2007:118). Spirits and gods, defined as “minimally counterintuitive intentional agents” are seen as the foundational features of religion. Cognitive religionists argue that religion or religious culture emerges from religious ideas, or cognition and that “while religion does function in ways that serve a range of human needs...and does take on rich symbolic meanings...supernatural agents are not merely ornaments in religious systems but are the objects around which religious belief, behavior and community coalesce” (Tremelin 2006:144). Importantly,

although spirits belong to the category of supernatural beings which include ghosts, goblins, fairies and unicorns, spirits matter more because they have knowledge – important knowledge that impacts the individuals’ social interaction and survival. Accordingly, spirits are uniquely important social agents. The universally salient feature projected onto supernatural agents is the mind. As such, “what makes gods simultaneously important and extraordinary is *what they know* and *how much they know*. The quality and degree of gods’ knowledge, in turn, have consequences for human cooperative behavior” (Tremblin 2006:113). Because spirits and gods are “just like ordinary human and animals” in having mental states (as in knowledge, dispositions and desires), they are therefore part of a community of beings, and as such, they interact with and influence other members of the community. While the nature and degree of interaction and influence varies across cultures, the species-specific salience of spirits remains undisputable. The cognitive approach to religion therefore posits the reality of spirits and affirms the pan human significance of conceptualizing god as divine knowledge.

This scholarship is concerned with one central question, what is Obia? The work differs from previous discourse in employing literary Occult tradition to theorize Obia as a Conceptual Metaphor for God, in addition to employing prevailing definitions of Obia as healing and protection, as well as evil magic. Our exposition of Obia as Mind, Will, Knowledge and Wisdom also incorporates long standing Occult theories which argue for Magic as Scientific Religion. This Cognitive approach to Obia complements current scholarship in the Cognitive Science of Religion and Anthropology which posit a positive interrelationship between the Cognitive Sciences, Shamanism, Religion and human evolution. In particular, cognitive models of distributed cognition and shamanism are similar in expressing the

“importance of meaningfulness in the natural world and the interconnectedness of people with elements in the natural world” (Hubbard 2003:40). This interconnectedness may be seen in recurring shamanic myths about the Wisdom of the Spider and the artificial intelligence of the World Wide Web (www). At the cellular level, it is also evidenced in the worldwide distribution of cell phone technology which privileges visual imagery and shamanic insistence that their profession is based on post-literacy (as opposed to pre-literacy) engendered by the reliance on mental imagery cultivation and expertise.

Further, the Cognitive Schema for God Concepts is a five-fold argument which posits that (1) humans are predisposed to detect agency and this predisposition is evolutionarily advantageous; (2) Gods are agents, intentional agents; (3) humans are predisposed to anthropomorphize and such predisposition leads to conception of this intentional agent as person, human; (4) this (anthropomorphized) human minimally violates the natural category of human person and is thus considered as supernatural; and (5) epistemology and (non)physicality are the two most important features of the supernatural (Tremelin 2006). Limitless movement and limitless knowledge based on the attribution of intentionality to both the natural and artificial world are therefore important correspondences. Storm clouds, wolves, computers, humans and Gods all get angry; all assigned cognition; all are said to “have a mind of their own”. It seems as if there has never been a time when scholars have produced such a large volume of work that grapples with the notion of God as somehow related to the human mind. Titles in contemporary scholarship in the Arts and Sciences speak to *Minding God*, “Shamanism and Cognitive Evolution”, *Modes of Thought and Modes of Religiosity*, *Minds and Gods* and “Cognitive Science and the Naturalness of Religion.” In looking at “Some Correspondences and Similarities of Shamanism and Cognitive Science”

Timothy Hubbard (2002) progressed naturally to deciphering “Further Correspondences and Similarities of Shamanism and Cognitive Science” (2003). Hubbard was led to the conclusion that “overall, the correspondences and similarities do not support the hypothesis that shamanism reflects a pathological or regressive type of thought; rather, the correspondences and similarities between the ideas in shamanism and ideas in cognitive science suggest that ideas in shamanism may reflect the application or use of structures and processes used in nonshamanic (and normative) thought” (2002:41).

As scholars explore the relationship between language and religion, it has generated numerous ways of *Rethinking Religion*, one of which involves *Bringing Ritual to Mind*. The political implications of these works have generated seminal questions as to “Who Owns Culture?” Robert McCauley, a pioneer in the Cognitive Science of Religion has also explored “The Cognitive Foundations of Religion and Science” with the resultant affirmation of the “Naturalness of Religion; [and] Unnaturalness of Science.” By and large, cognitive scientists theorize that religion is more natural than science and that “it is the survival of science, not religion, which depends upon our protection and support” (McCauley 2000b:66). All this rethinking is occurring years after Boyer’s *Religion Explained* held this innate disposition as evolutionarily advantageous. Hubbard’s insistence that “views in contemporary cognitive science and views in shamanism are convergent” (2003: 69) is proven by the fact that Igbo healers have long stated that God is “the Wisdom and Knowledge that reveals himself” (Umeh 1997) and Kabbalists concur that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1 KJV). Even librarians have had to contend with spirit talk as Necrobibliography has pushed them to develop methodologies for “Cataloguing

Spirits.” Like Magic, Spirituality is finally “putting in appearances” and easing its way through the dense walls of the modern academy.

Cognitive Linguistics: In the Bi-ginning was The Word

Scientific Religion has long accepted as true, what cognitive scientists and some eminent anthropologists have recently discovered; the undeniable indispensability of the Word to human existence. In endowing humanity with his latest deliberations on “The Human Beast”, well known anthropologist Tom Wolfe stated emphatically that there is no such thing as a “missing link” in the cycle of human evolution. He offers instead that the much repeated but generally misunderstood passage from the beginning of St. John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Wolfe notes that “This has baffled Biblical scholars, but I interpret it as follows:”

Until there was speech, the human beast could have no religion, and consequently no God. In the beginning was the Word. Speech gave the beast its first ability to ask questions, and undoubtedly one of the first expressed his sudden but insatiable anxiety as to how he got here and what this agonizing struggle called life was all about. (Wolfe 2006)

Having acknowledged our primal roots Wolfe affirms that “to this day, the beast can’t live without some explanation as the basis of whatever status he may think he possesses. For that reason extraordinary individuals have been able to change history with their words alone, without the assistance of followers, money, or politicians (Wolfe 2006). Wolfe’s invocation of the spiritual paradigm to explain language comes not a moment too late. For it coheres with recent developments in Western academia; even as it parallels ancient African philosophy and recent Rastafari theology of the “word power and sound.”

Wolfe offers further that in with the existence of *homo loquax* – man talking, “it becomes difficult for neo-Darwinists to continue to say that structures consisting only of

words are not real and durable” (Wolfe 2006). Esoteric Religion asserts continually that “there is a certain natural connexion between letters, words, numbers, gestures, shapes... so that any idea (as we might call it) ‘spirit’ may be composed or called forth by the use of those things which are harmonious with it, and express particular parts of nature” (Crowley, 1981: 2). The exercise of Will towards the interrelatedness of nature is exemplified by the Word. Within the cognitive program, the linguist’s concern with meaning in language, the anthropologist’s interest in the cultural construction of meaning, and the psychologist’s attention to the structure, processing and understanding of cultural and linguistic knowledge have met fertile ground in discourse—broadly defined as various genres of spoken and written texts. Importantly, cognitive linguists have elevated their discipline by virtue of a profound understanding that *METAPHOR IS LIFE*.

Since Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), developments in Cognitive Linguistics proceed on three important assumptions: (1) that language, thought and reality exist in mutually constitutive relationships, (2) that the mind is embodied, and (3) that metaphor, far from being a (decorative) linguistic device is more so a conceptual phenomenon bound-up with socio-cultural, neural and bodily elements (Gibbs and Wilson 2002, Kovecses 2005, Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Reality it turns out is subjective, constrained by and grounded in language and bodily experience; while metaphor is the semantic domain par excellence, cognitively irreducible and irreplaceable (Kittay 1987) and “embodying” all the intricacies and complexities of language itself; and in fact forms the basis of language. As such, language is seen as an “extended metaphor.” The relationships between language, thought and reality are expressed more broadly as evidencing language as lens, toolkit and category maker (Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003).

This recognition of the mutually constitutive relationship between language, thought and culture allows for the cognitive exploration of archetypes found in pathographies, stories and cultural myths. Recurring symbols as expressed in sacred geometry, mystical alphabets, theological numerology and astrology become more understandable as metaphors of thought. The panhuman universals show us that “Religious Metaphors [are] Mediators between Biological and Cultural Evolution that Generate Transcendent Meaning” (MacCormac 1983). The plethora of stories and myths surrounding Obia can no longer be dismissed as superstitious fantasies; instead they serve as testimonies to naturalness of religion as embedded in universal archetypes and symbols. In Jungian terminology, this is the story of *Man and His Symbols*, for Joseph Campbell, these are *The Myths to Live By*.

Carl Jung, in writing *Essays on a Science of Mythology* argues for “the existence of a collective psychic substratum” or *collective unconscious*. In esoteric terms this is also called the “akashic records,” the “universal mind” or “the mind of God.” Noting that myths are experiences and not inventions of the primitive psyche, Jung posits them as “original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes” (Jung and Kerényi 1993:73). Accordingly, myths are essential to the well being of peoples and societies. They are the life of the society, the soul of its people, and any loss of mythological heritage leads to destruction and decay. Cross-culturally, recurring primordial images such as the cross and the circle; archetypal figures such as “the old man”, “the spider”, “the child”, “the green woman” and “the monkey” affirm that the human brain is hard-wired for myth-making. The Akan Anansi, Cherokee Grandmother Spider and Hindu Web of Indra, attests to the fact that the Spider archetype is the ubiquitous prototype of the “Wise Man” symbolized by the

number eight, the geometry of infinity. This “Wise Man” is often a wise “Old Man” who travels with a Monkey. This “Monkey Man”, is the JamAfrican Obia man whose clients “hug him up” according one popular song.¹³ The Monkey is also *Esu Elegbara* of the Yoruba, the *Signifying Monkey* of African Americans, *Hanuman* of the Hindu’s and the Egyptian *Ape of Thoth*. All these images and archetypes affirm that “human nature demands the satisfaction of the religious instinct” (Sabazius 2002:1). This religious instinct is verbal and numerical, we are human only in so far as we have the capacity to imagine, create and use words and numbers. Obia is, in the primal sense, the appropriate use of Thought. From Igbo *Obi* (mind), to Egyptian *Thoth* (Thought), the Hebrew *Daath* (knowledge), and Greek *gnōsis* (knowledge); every cognitive act is the casting of a Spell, every willful action is a Spelling of Obia. This is neutral mystical power of the Esoteric tradition.

Esotericism, Gnosticism and Occult Traditions

The criminalization of African religion drove spiritual practices underground, where rituals and ceremonies were always conducted in secret. Of necessity, the organic development of African religion in Jamaica took the form of secret societies. For this reason, JamAfrican Obia is essentially a marginalized occult religion and a form of Gnosticism. Within, the cruel reality of slave society, Obia priests emerged as Gnostic redeemers, mystics who possessed saving occult knowledge. Indeed, Obia soteriology was espoused in the phrase “invulnerability against the white man” and Obia gnosis protected enslaved Africans from “all ills that might otherwise happen.” This knowledge of how to survive where others had failed, and how to successfully break the yoke of white rule, in the words of Modda B, “is the secrecy around Obia that gives it a bad name.” The word “occult” refers to secret or hidden things, and “esoteric” defines “secret or semi-secret spiritual knowledge, including both

cosmological and metaphysical gnosis” (Versluis 2002:11). Esotericism¹⁴ is “cosmological or metaphysical religious or spiritual knowledge that is restricted to or intended for a limited group, and not for society at large” (ibid). In the making of the New World, this saving knowledge of enslaved Africans, this Obia proved an effective weapon against the slavocracy.

Western esotericism utilizes “sympathetic empiricism” to study “alternative or marginalized religious movements whose proponents in general distinguish their own beliefs, practices, and experiences from public, institutionalized religious traditions” (Versluis 2003: 31). This methodology by which Obia scholars enter the imaginal world of their esoteric subjects, “means that one seeks, as much as possible, to enter into and understand the phenomenon one is studying from inside out” (Versluis 2003: 31). This approach attempts to limit the use of a strictly rational approach to unfamiliar world of Obia, such rationalism which has in the past led only to misunderstanding, demonization and reductionism. Sympathetic Empiricism is employed as a “middle ground between historiographic objectification on the one hand, and phenomenological subjectification on the other” (ibid) as a means of giving due credence to the mystical experiences which inform Obia Catholicism. Obia scholarship challenges the researcher to understand the world in new and unfamiliar ways. In this regard, the imaginative effort is a critical one, one which gives access to new types of knowledge as well as the interpretive tools necessary for understanding. The application of sympathetic empiricism is in truth, a form of applied anthropology which seeks redress historical wrongs, to investigate and find solutions to practical problems caused by the continued misrepresentation of Obia.

Esotericism's interdisciplinarity – which includes phenomenological focus on Occult traditions such as Magic, Mysticism, Secret Societies, Rosicrucianism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah and Hermeticism is aimed at fostering a deeper public understanding of these esoteric movements and the historical currents associated with them. My use of the term Esotericism incorporates both the religionist and historical approaches as defined by Hanegraaff. Citing the origin and foundation of Western esotericism in Renaissance hermeticism, Hanegraaff defines esotericism as “a container concept encompassing a complex of interrelated currents and traditions from the early modern period up to the present day” (1999: 4). In its emphasis on gnosis, Western esotericism converges with religionist approaches which “which emphasize experiential rather than rational and dogmatic modes of knowing, and which favour mythical/symbolic over discursive forms of expression” (ibid). Gnosis is understood as liberating spiritual knowledge, usually in the form of mystic revelations about the self and the cosmos.

Advocating for Esotericism as “a broadly postmodern *Zeitgeist*, instinctively critical of the ‘grand narratives’ of modernity and therefore sympathetic towards the recovery of ‘suppressed alternatives’” (Hanegraaff 1999:12) argues for Esotericism's assimilation into the academic mainstream as a sign of its emancipation from the stigma of being a “counter ‘counterculture’-culture” in the Western academy. This postmodern *Zeitgeist* movement within academia offers a useful paradigm for those arguing for a reinterpretation of Obia. Like the term “Obia”, the use of “Esotericism” – an old problematic term – for new institutional frameworks may cause those who opt to use it to lose academic credibility. The hope, supported by sober and rigorous academic exchange, is that the term Obia and Western Esotericism will in the near future “shed [their] questionable associations and

become broadly accepted as a neutral term” (9). Indeed, this transformation in Western thought is possible with studied focus on the content of Esotericism, the saving knowledge hidden within the phenomena. Esotericism “describes the historical phenomena...“gnosis” describes what is esoteric, hidden, protected and transmitted within these historical phenomena”; without hidden knowledge to be transmitted in one fashion or another, one does not have esotericism” (Versluis 2002:12). Translated as “knowledge” or “understanding”, the Greek word *gnōsis* references both spiritual and scientific knowledge or metaphysical *gnōsis* and cosmological *gnōsis*. Versluis defines cosmological *gnōsis* as knowledge which “illuminates the hidden patterns of nature as expressing spiritual or magical truths” while “metaphysical gnosis, on the other hand, represents direct insight into the transcendental” (Versluis 2002:11).

Within the African Diasporan context, I wish Esoteric Obia to be understood specifically as (1) a form of ancient African Gnosticism and (2) its more recent reincarnation as Thelema Scientific Religion. Accordingly, Obia Esotericism in the broader sense defines African diasporan emanations of primal *Obia* as well as later 20th century developments in Euro-American occult philosophy. Therefore, if we conceive of these traditions in terms of evolution, we are referencing one system of knowledge with myriad manifestations. Obia’s universal and trans-historical features are described variously as Sciences. In essence, the term Obia may be said to describe Scientific Religion. As such, we argue for the reconceptualization of Obia as both a “kind of universal and trans-historical sui generis phenomenon...and a certain number of historical currents and traditions in western culture that are available for study regardless of how they are evaluated” (Hanegraaff 1999:7). As gnosis, Obia is the “wisdom and the knowledge which reveals itself”; as Scientific Religion

Obia is Magic and its European characteristics are based on William Lauron de Laurence's Scientific Mysticism and its practices are exemplified by Thelema Scientific Religion.

Thelema Scientific Religion and de Laurence Science

Founded in 1919 by the English magician Aleister Crowley, Thelema is the only Western literary occult tradition with an admitted spiritual commission to teach Obia. This duty to learn and teach "the mantras and the spells; the obeah and the wanga; the work of the wand and the work of the sword" (Crowley 2007: 16) has its foundation in the Egyptian Mystery System and claims to offer "a rational basis for universal brotherhood and for universal religion." Critiquing the fact that religion is cursed by its common association with extravagance and falsehood, and condemning established cults which shock intellectual convictions and outrage common sense, Crowley insisted that individual spiritual practice be subjected to the rigorous application of scientific techniques. The Constitution of the Order of Thelemites states that "The Order of Thelemites is categorically opposed to all superstitious religions, as obstacles to the establishment of scientific religion." Crowley dedicated his life to demystifying Magic and in so doing he appealed to the original spelling of Magic and put back the 'K' in Magic as he established literary Obia tradition with a worldwide following. In his outstanding work *Magic in Theory and Practice*, he made clear his life's work. "Magic is essentially the most sublime, and actually the most discredited, of all the available terms. I swore to rehabilitate Magic, to identify it with my own career, and to compel mankind to respect, love, and trust that which they scorned hated and feared" (Crowley 1973: 130).

Thelema religion was founded on the mystic revelation of Aiwass, a preternatural African presence who appeared to Crowley on his invocation of Thoth, the Egyptian God of

Wisdom. Aiwass, whom Crowley later came to identify as his Holy Guardian Angel (HGA) or Higher Consciousness (HC), dictated a three-fold “Book of the Law” in twenty-two pages. Crowley’s encounter with his psyche, or the Jungian collective unconscious, provided both cosmological and metaphysical gnosis. Far from convincing him of an “otherworldly” existence, Crowley’s mystical experiences caused him to theorise “about the the ‘psychological nature’ of spiritual attainment...in a quantitative manner, with emphasis on test and experiment and the possibility of inducing the same states by the paraphernalia of science instead of magic” (Asprem 2008:163). Crowley was impatient with ignorance and devoted his time to “naturalizing magic.” As Asprem tells us, “far from accepting the magical realm was a ‘separate reality’ which science could not touch, he struggled to devise a scientific method for reaching it” (Asprem 2008:163). In executing his Duty to “learn and teach” Obia as scientific method, Crowley published numerous texts. His comprehensive oeuvre attests to the seriousness with which he sought to execute his spiritual commission. It is no surprise therefore that Crowley’s¹⁵ translation of *Lemegeton*, or *Lesser Key of Solomon* which was plagiarized by Lauron William de Laurence becomes seminal to the Jamaican literary Obia tradition which emerged in the early 20th century.

As a literary occult tradition, Jamaican *de Laurence* or Science Obia is properly understood as a form of Thelema Scientific Religion. And the fact that in Jamaica “every likkle Science man opening Church” proves the tenacity of both the oral and literary forms of Obia. Rastafari Obia owes its literary origins to the publications of Western occult societies such as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the first Lodge that Crowley joined and through which he became renown. Howell, Rastafari’s founding father was a “Science Man” who returned to Jamaica from New York. He was influenced by societies such as the Hebrew

Israelism, a polycultural religion that Dorman argues “reworked threads from religious faiths, secret societies, and magical grimoires” (2007:61). Black Hebrew Israelite religious identity influenced Marcus Garvey’s Liberty Hall and “was lived through secret Spiritualist and Kabbalistic rituals, and taught openly through Sunday Schools and Masonic affiliates... it was an identity that was formed and performed in a mixture of Sanctified and Judaic rites” (Ibid). Howell’s theology as expressed in the first Rastafari text, *The Promised Key*, shows the strong influence of Hebrew Kabbalism and Hindu Occultism; as does various drawings and writings of his co-founder Hibbert.

The Promised Key is penned with a tone of venom for those who had turned Jamaica into an “obeah factory”. Pledging “death to all black and white wicked”, and lamenting the fact that “your black and white heart obeah factory is upside down”, Howell casts his spell with this “ramkin dose of poison” No. 666, (the “Mark of the Beast”) aimed at those who are “guilty of obeah” (Howell 2001:11). Things were indeed upside down, the sacerdotal art had become a commodity to be bought and sold, it had become demonized and it was being used to injure rather than to heal. Howell preached that Rastafari was the Myal or Spiritual balmyaad not a common “obeah shop”; he advocated that Rastafari, the much needed “balm in Gilead” was for “the healing of the nations” (Howell 2001:10). In this way, he unwittingly sought to recapture the original profession of the Igbo *Ndibia*, the doctors without borders. A much longer work of similar purpose is Michael Bertiaux’s *Voudon Gnostic Workbook*, (1988) the only Thelema influenced publication which deals directly with an African-Caribbean spiritual tradition.

Thelemites generally interpret *Wanga* as Voudon and accordingly many Thelemites practice Vodou. Bertiaux, a Voudon¹⁶ initiate who spent years in Haiti, created a literary

tradition based on his experiences. In his Workbook, Bertiaux traces the source of Voudon to the “Fa” of Niger Delta. Offering that the *Iwa* “actually draw their powers from the system of the Spell of Fa,” he affirms the primacy of the Word or “Fa” as *logos*: “Fa may be considered as probably the oldest Self-Conscious part of the Cosmic Self or Soul; but Fa is beyond any ego-type or persons, that is to say the masks of psychic energy which are worn by voodoo gods. For Fa creates the Vudu, or the sixteen magical units or monads, which are the Vedas of Vudu” (Bertiaux 1988:109). In this mystical revelation that the Voudon system of Magic has its roots in the Igbo *Fa* (word) and its *Afa* system of divination, we again arrive at the conclusion that *Obia* is primal. Umeh reiterates this in his explanation of Igbo genesis: “the Igbos have said it, times without numbers and in different ways, that their ancestors are *Ndi Mbu*, the First Ones (First Ancestors) and *Ndi Egede*, the Subsequent ancestors” (Umeh 1999:59); and again “the original ancestors also known as *Ndi Mbu* (The First Ones) or *Ndi Ichie Aka* (the most ancient or original ancestors)” (32).

Further, “it cannot be over emphasized that the Igbos say they came from the Spirit land and will return to *Be Chuckwu Onye nwuo o nabakwa Olisa Chukwu*, whoever dies goes back to God in the Mystic-tide-of-the-Universe (70). It is so that in the town of *Nnobi*, there is a shrine containing *Obi Mbu* (The First *Obi*). It is through this “mystic tide of the universe”, this “collective unconscious”, this “Great Spirit” that Myal Djumboh Cassecanarie was led to the understanding that *Obia* “is the name of the tribal system of *single* magic of the Popo, Koromantyn, Eboe and other tribes” (Cassecanarie 1895:1) emphasis in original. In light of the particular history of the Jamaican Maroons, and the large numbers of Africans from the Niger Delta imported into Jamaica during the slave trade era; this dissertation focuses on the mysticism of the Eboes/Igbos, those who carry the legacy of *Obi Mbu* (the first *Obi*).

Igbo Mysticism: Gnostic Obia

Igbo mysticism is encapsulated in the single phrase: *Chukwu welu Olu Dibia* which means “After God is Dibia.” Who is *Chukwu Abiama*? “*Chukwu Abiama is God the Revealer of Knowledge and Wisdom*” (Umeh 1997:135). The Igbos hold that “it is God the Knowledge and the Wisdom that Reveals HIMSELF. For to say the He reveals or provides... Knowledge and Wisdom still appears to source knowledge and Wisdom somewhere else” (ibid). While the word *Abiama* is a contracted form of *Abiaama*, *abia* meaning Knowledge or Wisdom and *ama* meaning Revelation or Revealer; “*Dibia* is made up of two words, *Di* and *Abia* meaning the Master of or the Expert in Knowledge and Wisdom” (ibid:ii). *Dibia* is known as “the wisest of wise” invested with holistic knowledge from *Agwu*, *Chukwu’s* energy, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge. Accordingly, Igbo mysticism is based on the premise that no one can be *Dibia* without being possessed by *Agwu*. This investment provides for the divining and administering of *Ogwu*, the ultimate solution as well as the performance of *Aja*, sacrifice. The *Dibia* profession is grounded in *òménàlà* or traditional values which dictate *Òfó* – Truth; *Ogu* – Justice and Forgiveness; and *Alo* – Responsibility as ethical principles symbolized in the sacred power of *Fa* – the Word.

An indispensable aspect of the Occult is the use of Hieroeidetic or mystical language. *Hieroeidetic language is the sacred secret language of the Knower*. Hieroeidetic knowledge is thus “understood in terms of a shift from an objectifying view of language based on self and other to a view of language as revelatory, as a *via positiva* leading toward transcendence of self other divisions” (Versluis 2002:13). Esoteric language therefore challenges our everyday use of language, reminding us that words are really transformative and performative sound symbols. Accordingly, esoteric language “is used not for conventional designation in a

subject-object relationship, but in order to transmute consciousness or to point toward the transmutation of consciousness” (ibid). An important example of Hieroeidetic language is the word “Salt” as used in *Africana occult*. In Jamaica “yuh salt” means that one is bad-lucked and to “suck salt” means “to suffer”; yet one can take a “salt baat” to rid oneself of this “sufferation” and bad luck. Obia practitioners who were said to “eat salt” could not fly back to Africa. In the mystical sense, to “eat salt” is to be grounded, to put down roots. Within the context of enslavement this was viewed as sacrificial suffering by Obia practitioners. Such suffering could be alleviated by the application of the homeopathic salt water of the Caribbean Sea; the route taken by enslaved Africans. This use of sympathetic magic or homeopathy is also seen in the fact that Obia is cast as both evil and good; as poison and medicine. Those with an occult understanding of sacrifice know that an eye for an eye does not leave the whole blind; but rather than an eye for an eye makes for “four eye vision.”

The varying levels of mystical language are interrelated and accordingly, while popular understandings of Spelling define it in linguistic terms solely, for Occultists Spelling is first and foremost a Numerical Science, a Theological Arithmetic. Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, believed that “God manifests in the mathematical laws which govern everything, and the understanding of those laws, and even simply doing mathematics, could bring one closer to God” (Waterfield 1988:25). *Dibia* John U. Umeh, in unveiling the mysteries of Igbo mysticism affirms that

Igbo numerology, among other things, provides some theoretical framework for the explanation of a number of mysterious feats achieved by the ancient Igbo *Dibia* such as: *Ibi abuo/ibi iboo* (bi-location/splitting into two); *ife efe* (flying); *ise ese* (lifting up to the surface or space or floating); *ikwu ekili/lwu ekili* (jumping *ekili*); *ide nde* (melting away, melting through matter or melting

into thin air), *ishi eshishi* and also *igho* (materializing into an animal, bird, etc., or turning into something else, etc.). (Umeh 1997:41)

It is these accomplishments, among others, which make *Dibia* “the wisest of the wise.” Cross- culturally *Dibia* is the Buddha – Spiritual Teacher, the Magus – Master of Knowledge and the Hierophant – Interpreter and Teacher of Mystical Knowledge. In ancient times and among the Greeks, the one who “shows the Holy” or the “leader of sacred rites” was at the top of the hierarchy or structure of power or authority. This recurring feature of the privileged position of Sacred Knower throughout human societies points to Occult knowledge as a pan-human phenomenon.

Arguments, Claims and Theses

The central claim of this dissertation is that interdisciplinary scholarly attention to JamAfrican Obia within a Cognitive framework provides for an appreciation of Obia as a pan-human phenomenon. I utilize the heteroglossia of both scholarly and occult literature as well as ethnographic material and phenomenal spiritual experience to transcend traditional approaches which allow for the demonization of Obia as black magic and evil witchcraft. I argue that the *Obia* of the Niger Delta *Ndibia*, as well as other continental African healing professions, were transformed within the context of spiritual terror which characterized Jamaican slave society. The occult profession of the *Obia* doctors was centered around itinerant travels to aid suffering humanity. The brutality of plantation slavery created an urgent need for these original “doctors without borders” who assisted not only with necessary healthcare, but always provided the technology for *petit marronage* and large scale rebellions, in addition to tending to the spiritual needs of JamAfricans. Theorizing Obia through the prism of the Occult helps us to understand Obia not simply as spiritual power or

protection and healing but also as “specialized knowledge reserved for the priesthood” (Stewart 2005b) and cognitively determined “activities toward the spirit” (Murphy 1994). This pan-human rendering of Obia proves the adaptive and cultural value of Spirit as transcendental psyche, and helps us rethink accepted notions about the nature of reality and the place of the human species within it. It aims to serve as a template for Caribbean Spiritual Anthropology and Caribbean Obia Theology.

This articulation of Obia as universal religion uses a cognitive approach which focuses on recurring concepts as well as universal features in JamAfrican religion. Specifically, while privileging the foundational features of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church, I focus on “Spirit” as a recurring concept and “working Obia” and/or “working the Spirit” as the cognitive grammar or foundational code informing its denominational construction. This interdisciplinary Spiritual Anthropology of Obia offers two foundational Spirit concepts, *Spiritology* and *Spirituology*. *Spiritology* defines the cognitive theological approach to spirits, exemplified by this work, which addresses the reality of Spirits and is centered on explicating why Spirits make a distinct difference in human destiny. *Spirituology* is a phenomenal theory of spirit which affirms spirits as real, active powers and African Diasporean as a sacred science in which Spirit is worked, through individual experiences as well as ritual and ceremonial action. Additionally, I employ the concept of Catholicism to signal the commitment to Spirit which incorporates and utilizes all available spirit cultures and which as a whole embodies and symbolizes the Occult or hidden knowledge. Ultimately, I argue that historically JamAfrican religion is comprised of eight principal denominations which as a whole constitute the Obia Catholic Church. I posit that each denomination of the Obia Catholic Church emerged within a socio-historical context which required new ways of

utilizing spiritual power. I argue that concept of neutral mystical power though present among the slave population of the Spanish period (1518 – 1655), progressed as an organic medico-religious reaction to the British invasion of the island and subsequent mass enslavement of Africans. Ethnic African conceptions of spiritual power became organized around the etymon *Obia* and within the liberating impulse of Maroon culture, gave birth to JamAfrican religion.

Founded in 1739, at the signing of the Maroon Treaties, The *Obia* Catholic Church represents a dynamic response to different forms of oppression and serves as a compass for the evolution of JamAfrican religious thought. Kromanti *Obia* (1739); Myal *Obia* (1768); Christian-Myal *Obia* (1784); Kumina *Obia* (1841); Revival *Obia* (1860); Science *Obia* (1873); Mpokominya *Obia* (1914); and Jah-Rastafari *Obia* (1933) are the eight denominations of the *Obia* Catholic Church, and I offer that as lexical items, these designations affirm the salience of Spirit within JamAfrican religion. These points on the *Obia* compass are not discrete categories, but broad and elastic classifiers which catalogue defining moments in the evolution of JamAfrican religion. In this sense these denominations should be seen as major emanations of continental African *Obia*. Of a fact, enslaved and emancipated Africans in Jamaica referred to the different ethnic African practices, as well as individual practitioners as *Obias* (Turner 1982). In this esoteric context major socio-cultural shifts produced new religious forms (*Obias*) which provided a fertile space for individual practitioners (*Obia* women and men) who “get dem ting different” through both working and the workings of the Spirit.

Transcendental experience of the Spirit is properly conceived of as a phenomenology of religion. This recurring feature across human societies tells us that human experience is

dictated and informed by the human psyche, the singular aspect of being human. "Man is a being in search of meaning" (Plato) and this meaning quest is as psychological as it is phenomenological. Meaning is a species of belief and Paracelsus affirms that "he who wants to believe must also know; for only from knowledge, and because of knowledge does faith arise" (Paracelsus 1973:160). Further, "knowledge is experience" (ibid) and Obia is defined by the experience of occult phenomena. As a Phenomenology of Religion, *Gnostic Obia from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari* attempts to clarify what it has seen, and again (combining all previous activities) tries to comprehend what has appeared. Finally "it ... confront[s] chaotic 'reality', and its still uninterpreted signs, and ultimately testif[ies] to what it has understood" (Leeuw 1963:15). It is our understanding that the Igbo *Dibia* established Obia Missions in the New World. The following chapters seek to pass on the understanding that Africana Obia is a body/establishment of Healing Missions and Obia practitioners are Healing Missionaries who came West to care for enslaved Africans.

Dissertation Outline:

Occult traditions are grounded in myths and stories, and this dissertation, in its extensive use of fieldwork data and published eyewitness accounts of Obia, is reflective of this mythological tradition. Père Labat's experience of Obia in the French West Indies led him to conclude that "others I know often exaggerate their accounts of such matters, but I believe it may be considered that all they say is not false, although perhaps it may not be entirely true. However, I am persuaded that there are some absolutely true facts (under such stories)" (Cassacanarie 1895:57). The mystic on the other hand affirms "Yes, there existed in the past and there exists in the present, a potent and real magic; yes, all that legends have said of it is true, but, in contrariety to what commonly happens, popular exaggerations are, in

this case, not only beside but below the truth” (Levi 1910:11). Therefore, when we seek to know what this Obia is, it cannot be overstated that we are dealing with the Occult, with mysterious and secret things, with things that traditionally are kept hidden from the general populace eyes. To be a mystic, is to be wise, to be *Dibia*, to be Obiawoman “is to know the true nature of the visible and invisible elements that compose the Macrocosm and Microcosm, and to possess the art to direct and to employ the invisible powers of nature” (de Laurence 1915:394). This Obia treatise is written with the understanding that *Agwu adighi Mmadu agwu*, “without Agwu mankind would perish;” but *Ofeke malu ogwu Mmadu agwu*, “if Ofeke (the uninitiated) is taught Ogwu humanity would perish” (Umeh 1997:97).

Gnostic Obia from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari: A Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church proceeds with a further four chapters. Chapter 2, “One Negro can bewitch another, (Obia they call it)”: Working “The Unclean Thing” and Effecting “Powerful Healing” presents the contemporary esoteric context of JamAfrican Obia through an ethnographic lens. Stories and anecdotes collected during fieldwork provide a kaleidoscope of images, concepts and experiences which serve to underscore Obia as a paradoxical phenomenon; being both the unclean thing and powerful healing. Chapter 3, *A History of the Problem of Obia: This “Black Thread of Mischief, as Powerful an Agent as Slavery”* provides an historical overview of the development of Obia in Jamaica. It traces Obia working from the shores of West Africa to the Caribbean while focusing on the 1760 criminalization of Obia as the defining moment in JamAfrican religion. The chapter introduces the Igbo concept of *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* – itinerant medical practice as the primary agent in the formation of JamAfrican Obia. Other West and Central African cognates are presented with specific attention to Akan and Congolese cognates as germane to JamAfrican Obia. Obia practitioners are shown to be

missionaries who provide healing and knowledge to suffering humanity. The Igbo concept of the *Obia* man as an embodiment of divine knowledge and wisdom provides the basis for the theory of Gnostic *Obia*.

Chapter 4, *From Obia Mission to Obeah Factory: Spirit Theology and the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church* theorizes the formation of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church (JOCC) by charting eight major emanations of *Obia* from 1739 to 1933. By contrasting the *Obia* Mission with the Obeah Factory, this chapter addresses the transformation of primal *Obia* in Jamaica and the place of *Obia* in the creation of JamAfrican culture and society. It shows the loss of ethics in the profession of *Obia* as occasioned by brutal slavery. The signing of the Maroon Treaties is shown as pivotal in the transformation of JamAfrican spiritual practices and in engendering a particular use of spiritual intelligence known as Anancyism or Djinnalship. The eight major denominations of JamAfrican *Obia* are shown to emerge from particular socio-historical trends. Kromanti *Obia* (1739); Myal *Obia* (1768); Christian-Myal *Obia* (1784); Kumina *Obia* (1841); Revival *Obia* (1860); Science *Obia* (1873); Mpokominya *Obia* (1914); and Jah-Rastafari *Obia* (1933) are presented as lexical indexes to the salience of Spirit in JamAfrican *Obia*, which is shown to be a pan-human phenomenon incorporating all the spirit cultures it encounters. The focus of the chapter is Gnostic *Obia* as “revealed knowledge and wisdom”. *Obia* is shown to be holistic knowledge and/or a composite of various types of Knowledges or intelligences. Paradigms of Gnosticism and Cognitive Science of Religion and Cognitive Linguistics shape the discourse.

Gnostic Obia: African Spirituology from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari is the final chapter which concludes with an insistence that *Obia* scholars take “Four Eyes for the Journey” into the phenomenology of *Obia*. This 20/20 Spiritual I-sight posits a theory of *Obia*

as *African Spirituology*: A theology or a system of thought concerned with or centered on Spirit as well as branches of specialized knowledge regarding the creation, manifestation and transformation of Spirit. The conclusion also attributes Obia malpractice to “The Betta Dan Syndrome” or psychological rupture occasioned by cognitive terror of the slave era. The Seal of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church is presented as a pan-human Medicine Wheel representing among numerous others, The Sacred Hoop of the Native Americans; The Beninese Asen; The Magical Circle of the Wiccans; The Mercury of The Sacred Astrologist; The Sun Dial of the JamAfrican Revivalist; The BaKongo Cosmogram; and The Mystical “O” of the Igbo. The chapter provides of reinterpretation of Leonard Howell’s *The Promised Key* against the backdrop of Igbo Mysticism and Thelema Scientific Religion. The Mystical Revelation of Rastafari as a medi-theology of universal healing is shown to be the latest emanation of JamAfrican Obia which is grounded in *Chukwu Abiama*, “the Wisdom and Knowledge who reveals himself.” The dissertation closes with “Random Notes Toward a Conclusion,” a discourse which speaks to the meta-textuality of the scholarship and equates African Spirituology with interdisciplinary Liberal Arts Education. It places Obia within the context of the Enlightenment and posits the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church as a form of Scientific Illuminism both shaped by the conflicting forces of modernity.

This *Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church* shows that the demonization and criminalization of African religion against the backdrop of the enslavement and dehumanization of Africans could not and cannot eradicate the human impulse to live freely and spiritually. In a sentence, Obia represents “organized and concentrated attempts to impose our Will on certain parts of the Cosmos” (Crowley 2002:39). As transculturation, it is the “creative, ongoing process of appropriation revision and survival” (Fernández Olmos and

Paravisini Gebert: 2003:6) manifested in “the management of all we say and do, so that the effect is to change that part of our environment which dissatisfies us, until it does so no longer” (Crowley 2002:40). When seen in this new light, what is secret about Obia need not give it a bad name; for the secret around Obia is an open secret: It is the knowledge that “man is mind.” In this universal Wisdom, in this World Wide Web of life, it is shown that “bad luck worse dan Obia”; that Obia is the healing wisdom; that the Obia Man is the original Spider Man. In proverbial Akan, “no one goes to the house of *Ananse* [the Spider] to teach it wisdom.” For this revealed Wisdom and Knowledge, the Jamaican balmyaad patient expresses her heartfelt gratitude with an emphatic “tank yuh Jeesas fi dis Obia!” [Thank you Jesus for this Obia].

CHAPTER 2

“ONE NEGRO CAN BEWITCH ANOTHER, (OBIA THEY CALL IT)”:
WORKING “THE UNCLEAN THING” AND EFFECTING “POWERFUL HEALING”

To God all things are fair and good and right; but men
hold some things wrong and some right. Good and Evil
are one.

Campbell, 1972

Everybody desperate for the Spirit!...Everybody waan
Spirit. Having di Spirit give dem heights and fame!

Modda V, 2007

Obia is the unclean thing...and powerful healing.

Modda V, 2007

In March of 2007, I asked Modda V, “What is Obia?” Her response after a sigh and a pause: “Obia, Obia is the unclean ting...and powerful healing.” Not long before this question, Modda, in reference to current affairs in her healing ministry declared “everybody desperate for the Spirit...Everybody waan Spirit. Having di Spirit give dem heights and fame!” Earliest known written records of Obia in the English-speaking Caribbean record Obia as both “the unclean thing and powerful healing.” These early descriptions inform us that “one Negro can bewitch another (Obia they call it)” and “that one (Obia) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our country folk do in England” (Handler and Bilby 2001:88). Walduck, a British naval officer in eighteenth century Barbados, communicates further that he knew of “negroes complaining that they are bewitched, an Obia Negro hath taken out of their eyes bones, shells out of their thighs” (Handler and Bilby 2001: 88). Placing Obia in the realm of magic, Walduck equates it with the occult practices and beliefs of unlettered English “country folk.” Obia is at once seen as spiritual power – the power to bewitch (charm or harm), as well as the power to cure/ heal. It is this same power which three centuries later

Modda V declares the members of her congregation are “desperate for”. Powerful healing is defined in terms of “spiritual surgery” and/or “psychic surgery” – the extraction of objects from the body; said objects having been inserted by use of the same power. We note that “one Negro can... Obia” another, and that same “one Obia... negro can cure another”; Obia-Workers then as now, being cast in the dual role of “Iniquity Workers” and “Do Good Men” – signifying the double-edged sword of Spiritual Intelligence. The Obia Professors were said to be revered and respected by “every Negroe”, who consulted them “with the most implicit faith, upon all occasions” (Edwards 1799: 166). Importantly, “there was scarcely an estate which did not contain a priest or priestess of this deadly art, nor did there appear to be a single negro escaping under its influence” (Phillippo 1843:243).

From this medico-spiritual beginning, the profession and professors of Obia went on to develop a “strange career.” In 1935, Leonard Howell, *The First Rasta*, and the author of *The Promised Key*, was describing the Jamaican society in scathing terms as an “Obeah Factory” (Howell 2001: 11) and banning admittance of “Obeah dogs” (ibid) from the Rastafari “Assembly of Black Supremacy.”

No admittance for Fortune Tellers witch and old hige. No admittance for Obeah dogs none whatever... You will not plant your obeah self with no man or woman so that we who are King Alpha’s children cannot get rid of you until the obeah rotten. Science my dear King your black and white heart obeah factory is upside down. (Howell 2001: 11)

Like Walduck, Howell aligns Obia with current supernatural complexes – fortune telling and witchcraft. Unlike Walduck, his tone is laced with venom. Like Walduck, he knows of the “spiritual surgery”. Unlike Walduck, Howell, who is himself defined by his contemporaries as an Obia man, ferociously attacks the “one who can Obia” and pledges “no admittance for ghost witch lizards, no admittance for Alligators, Snakes, Puss, Crab, Flies, Ants, Rats, and

Mice, and Lodestones, Pin, and Needles” (ibid). One hundred and forty-six years after *The 1789 Committee Report*, Obia practitioners had become more feared than revered and certainly were not paid the greatest respect by every Negro.

Howell was a known Obiaman, and so was Hinds, Rastafari co-founder and former disciple of the famous Obiaman Bedward. He unwittingly proclaims that Rastafari Obia is the antidote for those who are “guilty of Obeah”. Rastafari constitutes a “ramkin dose of fatal deadly poison” which will cause the guilty to “leave...quickly” (Howell 2001:11). Most importantly, Rastafari’s 1935 banning of Obia is similar to the 1760 retaliatory banning by the plantocracy, in that the (re-) criminalization of Obia becomes written into (religious) law. The “Supreme Law of King Alpha the King of Kings”, decrees that

you will not blind give big foot or sore, or turn any more children across the woman’s belly and kill her baby when it is born, or any time after Every good looking man’s wife you see you want to cohabit with her, you rotten gut snake, and anywhere a man put a business you go there to kill and drive him away, you dead cold horse. (Howell 2001: 11)

It is instructive that Howell in administering his “ramkin dose of fatal deadly poison” (ibid) succumbs to the up-side down “black and white heart Obeah Factory”, which engendered in his own movement the crab antics of the wider society – jealousies, suspicions and the fight for power. Indeed, then as now, people are still “desperate for the Spirit.” Howell himself becomes guilty of Obia malpractice (See Chevannes 1994 and Lee 2003), and *The First Rasta* dies in obscurity in 1981, the same year that Bob Marley, Rastafari’s greatest Reggae messenger also transcended. By this time the “Natural Mystic [was] flowing through the air” and Rastafari had already gained a world-wide following. The “Ramkin dose of fatal deadly poison” intended for “Black man Redemption” had been transformed into the “One Love” antidote, for after all “Rastafari [is] for the Healing of the Nations.”

Yet Rastafari's denouncement of Obia – holistic healing, continues unabated. These negative “images of Obeah in Caribbean Song”, according to Bilby (1993; 2008), in addition to evidencing “The Strange Career of Obeah”, constitute “An (Un)natural Mystic in the Air.” For example, it is ironic that “The Prophet”, renown Rastafari DJ Capleton, bemoans the fact that “bab-I-lon have dem a dis all dem owna ancestry” [Babylon has them denouncing their own ancestry] (Capleton, ‘Tour’) even as he – “the Fireman” – “Still Blazin’” chants “Cooyah, Cooyah, Cooyah fi di Obeah worker” – who is now placed among those considered the vilest sinners in Jamaican society – homosexuals. As this iniquitous denigration of Obia continues, Jamaican folklore has much to say on this complex issue. Miss Lou poems “Obeah win di War” and “House O’ Law” as well as songs such as Lovindeer’s “Oily” and Prince Buster’s “Healing in de Balmyard” all poke fun at Obia practice. The proverb “bad luck worse than Obia” would seem to indicate that Obia is not the greatest ill that could befall a person; but should an individual become subject to Obia malpractice she has the recourse to “Science Again” as Admiral Bailey tells us in lyrical fashion. What are we to make of this Obia *Paradox*? How should we gauge the seeming self-contradictory, self-demonizing impetus of those who believe in and work Obia? The following stories illustrate the complexity of Obia in twenty-first century Jamaica.

Sister Thomas on “The Unclean Ting and Powerful Healing”

The Obia *Paradox* is powerfully demonstrated in this repeat interview of a Revival Evangelist, who has recently been called and commissioned by The Spirit to start a prayer ministry. Sister Thomas, now in her fifties, had told me previously of being healed by a Kumina practitioner when she was in her early twenties. She had taken ill and was in the hospital for a prolonged period without relief. Her family went to a St. Thomas Bongo Man

to “look” into the matter. The Bongo Man divined that Thomas had indeed been the victim of spiritual malevolence. Saving Thomas was a delicate matter, because the Obia was powerful and her “days had been numbered”. The family was to return with a new nightgown which Bongo would “treat”, he would also supply medicine to be ingested by Thomas. Thomas donned the nightgown and took the medicine, having been told that if it did not work, she would die. However, Bongo was a powerful Obiaman, and within days of taking the medication, Thomas was out of the hospital. About two months after being told this healing narrative, I candidly asked Sister Thomas (now considered a Obia woman in her own “rites”) the pertinent question. What is Obia?

Have no clue. Negative energy, the opposite of good...Yuh know I don't know.

Why you think yuh don't know

My answer based on what I hear overtime, dat is something bad.

Do you consider the Rastaman who healed you a good Obiaman

When I got the stuff I thought he was connected to God, that he was good. But when I went to see him about ten years later, I was scared. The things I saw I was scared. *I did not really judge him then.* I was just sorry for the goat. What I remember about night is the goat. Dat cutlass look like it sharpen two side. One chop -- head fly, blood fly. And di man drink the blood, him tek the goat head and drink di blood. What I remember, was the man and the goat. Him ugly like sin... extremely ugly – Jamaica people say dats how sin look, say “yuh ugly like sin.” (emphasis mine)

Here a treated nightgown and liquid medicine constitutes a “connect[ion] to God”, but sacrificing a goat and drinking its blood by an “extremely ugly” Rastaman is equated with sin. In 2007 Jamaica sin looks like African ritual, sin looks like an African ritualist. We note that in Sister Thomas’ own estimation, she “did not really judge” Bongo, although she agrees that

his actions and physical features bore a strong likeness to sin. Sister Thomas is unable to reconcile being healed by one whose likeness was that of sin, and pleads ignorance of Obia, having “no clue” and not knowing about this “negative energy, the opposite of good.” The language is one her ancestors would not recognize, neither sin nor the devil are native African concepts. Sister Thomas describes the religiosity that she herself unwittingly embraces, in purely negative terms.

Karram: Repercussions of Dodging Distinction

Some deliberation on the specter of the Obia man is necessary. *The 1789 Committee Report* states that “the oldest and most crafty are those who usually attract the greatest devotion and confidence; those whose hoary heads, and somewhat peculiarly harsh and forbidding aspect, together with some skill in plants of the medicinal and poisonous species, have qualified them for successful imposition upon the weak and credulous” (Edwards 1789: 166). At the same time, it was reported that “the potent workings of Obi” created a climate of fear which produced in the negroes “a dread of incurring the terrible vengeance which is fulminated by the Obeah-men against any who should betray them” (ibid: 67). For this reason it was said to be “very difficult therefore for the white proprietor to distinguish the Obeah professor from any other negro upon his plantation” (ibid). *The 1866 Royal Report* states that Obiamen are “generally possessed of a very bad countenance” and that there is a “peculiarity about them” (Williams 1932: 40). Rampini reports that “there is something indescribably sinister about the appearance of an obeah man” (1873: 133). He continues with a description of general deportment of Obia men who operate as lawyers: “with a dirty handkerchief bound tightly round his forehead, and his small, bright, cunning eyes peering out from underneath it, he some sometimes visits the courts of petty sessions throughout

the island” (Ibid). In Sister Thomas’ case, we can safely surmise from her report that the combination of Bongo’s dread(ful) locks and his equally demonized ritual expertise terrified her. Throughout the historical literature Obia practitioners are indeed described as being phenotypically and ritualistically “ugly” (See Williams 1932 and 1934). The “peculiarity about them” often refers to some kind of bodily disfigurement. Prof. Dr. Myal Djumboh Cassecanarie in *Obeah Simplified: The True Wanga* (1895), tells this story of the carpenter Obia man Peter Barrat:

He had his beauty marred by some disease which had almost completely eaten away his nose; this disfigurement had also affected his palate, causing him to speak with a very hoarse voice. He returned from a sojourn of some years in Guiana, aged about 45; and being of a very irascible temper, and given to strong drink, he soon made himself disliked and feared; the latter feeling does not seem at all to have been mitigated by his giving proofs of his powers as an Obeahman. One of which proofs, was his being credited with the compelling of all sorts of people to give him employment, even his declared enemies, and regardless of the fact that he was a notoriously bad workman; and he always insisted and generally got his way, and the fruits thereof in the shape of increased pay, or being foreman of the work.

The first deed which gave him prominence as a dangerous Obeahman, came about by his one day meeting two young girls, sisters, on the road, who rather rudely laughed at him, and jeered at his want of a nose. An altercation ensued, which terminated by his stepping up to them, and passing his open hand down the face of each one, declaring as he did so that within three months they would be as noseless as he was, and no doubt would enjoy being laughed at for it too. This duly came to pass, and one of the women who died recently, was once pointed out to me in confirmation. “He whistled, and his bears came!” (28-29)

Cassecanarie cites the above example to show the power of the Obia practitioner in manipulating secret forces as well as those who are socially above them. Barrat “compelled” persons to give him work; and the general response to his disfigurement of face and grace did “not seem at all to have been mitigated by his giving proofs of his powers as an Obeahman.” Obia practitioners seemed to have made a point of being distinctive; if not

affected by some general physical defect, they made up for in their peculiar dress code or walking style¹⁷.

Yet the assimilation of many Obia practitioners into the Jamaican society brings with it a loss of distinctiveness that often proves detrimental. Most of the Obia practitioners that I have met in Jamaica go about their affairs dressed simply. Indeed, one often cannot distinguish them from the rest of general populace on the basis of dress. One Obia man who goes about dressed in slippers and shorts, had an international clientele travelling often to the eastern Caribbean and North America. When I commented on his attire, he responded by saying “nuh because you see mi dress suh, mi own villa pon di north coast and mi have mi business place dem.” One Modda told me the story of how she avoided being robbed on the bus. She was on her way from Half-Way-Tree where she had gone to purchase candles for a ritual. Half-way through the journey home, robbers appeared on the bus, meticulously going from seat to seat robbing the hard earned cash of each passenger. Modda said that before they got to her she simply opened the bag of candles, also exposing other Obia paraphernalia she had in her possession. The thieves on reaching her seat; took one look at the bag in her lap and proceeded to the next seat without asking her for a penny. I cite the following case as an example of problems of powerlessness arising from loss of distinctiveness, amounting to loss of respect and absence of fear.

Karram, a young Revival Obiaman of 38 (who “grow pon foot”) got caught up in a US visa racket of his own making. Incognito, he had given five passports to a “connection” at the US Embassy in Kingston. He loaded himself with the negotiated \$100,000 dollars cash and went to collect the five passports. Being incognito, as well as from “country”, Karram was both unknown and ‘out of his jurisdiction’. Unbeknown to him, his “connection” was a bandoloo woman¹⁸ in league with corrupt police officers. As soon as the cash changed hands between Karram and ‘the connection’, two police officers suddenly appeared and “arrested” him. He was boarded into a police vehicle and immediately discerned that he was “set up” and was about to be

killed. Karram was held in the car until nightfall at which point he was taken to an empty lot. According to him, he looked up and the skies opened up showing him a “sign”. He then began to scream and beg for mercy, telling the police officers that it was okay, they could take the money (said money they had taken from “the connection” and still had in the car) and spare his life. Somehow his pleading got through to them and they decided not to kill, and dropped him off at the side of some unknown road. Karam found his way back into his jurisdiction, promptly went to the police station, told his policemen of the ordeal and ordered them to retrieve both his cash and the passports. The next day he began receiving threatening phone calls, most of the threats beginning with the phrase, “hey Obiaman if you make anything happen to me, you @#(*&^%\$* dead.” Karam laughs a deadly laugh when relating the details of the telephone calls. He makes no comment about what will happen if his things are not returned to him. He puts the incident down to the fact that these “people think mi simple.”

Without his usual Revival attire and without the fearsome specter, Karam almost loses his life. He knows that the spirit is teaching him a lesson, and gives thanks for the “sign” in the night sky which saved him.

Karam’s “grow[ing] pon foot”¹⁹, means that he is more prone to these kinds of mishaps, which occurs less among converts who get their gift from being “slain in spirit”. Yet as a Revival and a man “from country” Karam tries as best as he can to assimilate into mainstream society. As an Obiaman, he trades in demonized spiritual power, yet he also wants to be seen as “holy and acceptable” in his “reasonable service” to God. This dichotomy between good and evil renders itself as an ongoing conflict between “holiness and empowerment.” Part of the problem with Obia is that practitioners cannot be seen as both spiritual doctors and “holy and acceptable.” Holiness is reserved for Euro-Christian religiosity, this Christian piety conflicts with the “ugly sin” of JamAfrican religiosity.

Modda V is a Revival Modda who runs a small balmyaad and church on the outskirts of Kingston city. In one of our many conversations she declares: “Everybody waan Spirit. Everybody desperate for the Spirit! Ah telling dem dat it’s better to walk Christ-like dan to

have di Spirit. But everybody waan Spirit, having di Spirit give dem heights and fame.” Modda V’s declaration confirms what another Obia practitioner told me. Commenting on the deference accorded to Obia practitioners in their communities, Teacherman affirmed that “an Obiaman is an empowered man!” Having the spirit empowers the individual, but walking Christ-like accords one respect. This polarity between respectability and reputation (Wilson 1973) is another significant feature of Jamaican society. Aunty Jay reconciles this conflict between Spirit and Christ (Africa and Europe) by “fulling up [her] belly with Jesus.” This proclaimed “Christfulness” however does not prevent her from being called an Obiawoman, but she is satisfied in distinguishing herself from those practitioners who “spoil demself [by] dealing wid duppy.”

“Obia Working” as Dealing Wid Duppy

The characterization of Obia as the spoiling or corruption of God’s gift is common among spiritualists. Mother Kay lamented to me how her godson, a man young in both age and Spirit had gone and “spoil himself [by] getting a skull.” The fact that her protégé had become a “skullman” was not only an indictment on her, but also a big sin which placed him in peril of God’s wrath administered through spiritual warfare with Obiamen more powerful than himself. She was quite upset that having left her care after being spoilt, Mongoose, her godson, had added insult to injury by opening his own church which seems to be thriving more than hers. What is most interesting about Mother Kay is that even though she constantly chastises Mongoose privately, she supports him openly. She has great respect for his gift and often takes or sends patients to him. Not only does she send patients to him but she utilizes him herself when she feels the effects of “di people dem [who] nuh stop send Obia for [her].” The “sending” of Obia between practitioners is characteristic of the spiritual

warfare endemic to Jamaica. Such is the paradox of the Jamaican Obia Complex that I can sit in the shrine of a man reputed to be one of the most powerful Obiamen in Jamaica, and hear a male patient bemoan the fact that “di Obia worker dem worse dan di gunman dem!”

The Obia Worker in the above instance not only references practitioners, but also the individuals who utilize their services. Further, in many instances, the Obia practitioner is considered innocent, and it is the wicked “iniquity working” Jamaican who is guilty of offering him money to send evil, thereby corrupting him. Maud, an elderly woman from St. Catherine who was traumatized by “iniquity working” neighbors; declared tearfully to me that “evil deh! evil deh! There is witchcraft! I will go to the top of the mountain and shout out dat evil deh!” [Evil exists! Evil exists! I will go to the top of the mountain and shout out that evil exists] Maud’s “sufferation” through paralysis, fallen angels and mongoose visitations is just as painful as MacIntosh’s chronic affliction. The following is the case of MacIntosh, whose entire family almost succumbed to the evil of Obia.

MacIntosh is a 65 year old Jamaican who has been living in the United States for over twenty years. The second child of three girls for her parents, she was raped and impregnated at eighteen by a family friend. Innocent and terrified, she hid the rape from her parents, until she fell, was taken to the doctor and discovered to be pregnant. Her father refused to believe her -- it was his friend. The community ostracized her for disgracing herself and her family. Five children and forty-seven years later, she hollers uncontrollably while relating this to me. Inconsolable, she tells me that her paternal uncle consistently Obiaed her family. She, her sisters, her father and mother, were all victims of her uncle’s selfish malevolence. Uncle Blank sent a blow and killed her father, his own brother over family land, he also Obiaed her mother, consistently sending evil to her. Given the promise shown by the sisters in their early years, she considers all three of their lives to be failures.

In MacIntosh’s case, she was only 17 years old and having passed her exams, she was chosen to pursue a career in teaching. In 1950s Jamaica this was a most respectable and lucrative vocation. On seeing her one day before her departure to teacher’s college, her uncle swore at her repeating the refrain “Ah teacha yuh waan tun nuh, ah teacha yuh wan tun” [So you want to become a teacher, so you want to become a teacher]. Thereafter she became ill and suffered from headaches and terrible cramps. Her mother fearing the worst “carried her out”. MacIntosh relates that the Balm

Healer who diagnosed that she was Obiaed, massaged her with oil and gave her medicine. She says that she is still frightened every time she remembers the things she passed out when she took the medicine. She was raped within months of being healed from this spiritual attack. Impregnated and ostracized, her teaching career died two years before her parents were to suffer a similar fate.

Her older sister had moved out of the family home and MacIntosh, now being the eldest child became her mother's confidant. Her mother begged her not to tell anyone about the spiritual malevolence plaguing the family. She witnessed her mother suffer many things, including a false pregnancy [known locally as "having belly"]. Her mother had strange dreams during the pregnancy and when she eventually went to the hospital to give birth at nine month, all that came out was a black ball of dried blood. When her father died, her uncle had taken charge of the funeral arrangement. It was a closed casket, and when before the service she opened the coffin to look at her father, "him cut up, cut up, all im seed Uncle Blank cut up, Lawd Jesus im cut up Papa!" She started wailing again. "But Papa come back, Papa come back an' give him one raas lick, cripple him. Dat fucker neva come a road again till him dead. Wicked raas!"

Yet before her uncle got the "one raas lick" from his brother, he had already succeeded in killing her mother. For MacIntosh, it was not just that he killed her mother, it was that he used her grandmother, her mother's own mother do it. MacIntosh, who was twenty at the time of her mother's demise had been seeing duppies for as long as she could remember. According to her, "when dem come een pon mi, ah fight dem, ah grab dem and ah tear dem up, ah tear dem yuh see, ah tear dem up." She uses her hands in a wringing motion (as if wringing laundry items) while relating this. At twenty, she also tried to fight her grandmother when she realized that she had come for her mother, who was already succumbing to her uncle's Obia. MacIntosh had been sitting on the verandah, listening tearfully to her mother's painful groaning in the bedroom. Suddenly, her grandmother appeared, walking steadfastly and angrily towards the house. She had known her grandmother and had never seen her in such a state of willful anger. When she entered the verandah, MacIntosh realized that she was headed for her mother's room. "Ah jump up and tried to stop her, I tried to push her away, I fight wid her, but she just push mi one side and march into the bedroom and den mi hear mi modda let out a big groan and mi know she seh dead." Her uncle remains the irredeemable villain, "imagine, him so wicked, im sen har own modda fi kill har." In keeping her promise to her mother, she has never told any of her siblings, and certainly spoke to no one about them until she related these events to me.

I listened to MacIntosh's pain, I felt her pain. It was real, related to me through true Jamaican style bawling. MacIntosh cried, and cried and cried, and when I thought she was done crying, she still had more tears. I begged her to see a therapist and go and "get herself

look afta.” But every time I would bring it up, she would say soon or later, or find some excuse about not having the money. I asked her whether she felt she had a right to be happy. It was a stupid question. She was bearing the weight of a legacy of negative spirituality and had accepted her lot. Her family life was horrible and she felt that everyone including her children hated her. But she was the keeper of secrets, the burden bearer, a legacy she believes was bequeathed to her by her mother. She will speak about spiritual wickedness, she knows it intimately, but she will not avail herself of the spiritual benevolence that her mother accessed to secure healing for her at 17. She is a powerful spiritualist in her way for she can “tear up duppies”, but she rejects the notion of having to use the same class of practitioners who send evil, as a means of alleviating the evil itself. In her rejection of Obia, she wanders from church to church never finding relief or fulfillment, because she come to associate Obia with negative spirituality which is “dealing wid duppy.”

Yet the rejection of Spirit often leads to more dangerous psychosis and sometimes chronic debilitating ailments and/or worsening social conditions. For example, Sister Bim ran away from Jamaica to Florida, USA to avoid “working the Spirit.” Since being in Florida for two years she has not been able to hold a steady job and has been constantly ill. Furthermore her children, grown men and women seem to be subject to endless misfortunes. Sister Bim has been told repeatedly by several Spiritualists that she needs to go back to Jamaica to serve in her church. Having resisted for two years with nothing to show but loss, she has finally packed up her bags and is heading home. I have encountered many “Unwilling Spiritualists”, mostly women, who resist to various degrees the dominance of Spirit in their lives. I have also met many “Regretful Spiritualists”²⁰, again mostly women, who now middle aged and beyond, having been called by the Spirit from their teens, bemoan the fact that

their lives of dedication to the Spirit have yielded nothing more than meager material wealth and a grudging respect.

Sister Hunter: The Unwilling Spiritualist

One of the most moving cases I know of is that of Sister Hunter, a 32 year old Healer who was called to Spirit Work in her late teens. Sister Hunter works with her mother, Modda Wright as a mother-daughter healing team. Together, they practice both individual and communal healing; they hold street meetings and healing services in addition to seeing clients on an individual basis. I conducted one month of research at Modda Wright's shrine. I say that I experienced the case, because about three months after returning to Atlanta from Jamaica, I was shown via a dream that Sister Hunter was ill. I was shown the circumstances which produced the illness as well as the fact that Sister Hunter was unaware of her own psychosis. I did not relate the dream to her mother, as I was told to wait. About three weeks after the news came that Sister Hunter was indeed very ill. I was still sworn to silence as I received frequent news of her rapid deterioration. She was eventually shipped out of Jamaica to New York, where she was hospitalized. She went home after four months, more coherent but with appallingly low self-esteem and an extreme anger with God.

Sister Hunter's psychosis stemmed from two major factors. (1) she was 32 years old and wanted to get married and have children, but was being prevented from doing so by the Spirit, and (2) another Sister had recently been chosen by the Spirit for healing work, she felt threatened by this latest development which had also put a big dent in her modest finances. In addition to these factors, some of the rituals done during the Journeying of the young spiritualist were ill-performed due to Sister Hunter's disobedience and it was prophesied that there would be negative repercussions. Interestingly, when Sister Hunter was in her early

twenties, she was told to go to a particular location and reside there for two weeks during which time she would meet her husband. She did not obey this commission and has been unable to find a suitable mate since. What has happened to Sister Hunter is that her early years of strict obedience to the Spirit had evolved into respectful disobedience, occasioned by the dissatisfaction with her temporal rewards. Over the long period of her calling she has “gotten time off” to complete tertiary studies and to go on extended vacations. Acutely aware of the fact that she belongs to a stigmatized tradition, she is obviously ashamed of her calling and jealous of those who do not have the “burden of the Spirit.” Yet she feels that her “spiritual lash” was unwarranted and unjust, not to mention excruciatingly embarrassing. Sister Hunter wants out; she wants to live a “normal” life. At present, angry and detached, she neglects her spiritual commissions and has lapsed into a state of lethargy, setting herself up for the next “spiritual lash” which is predicted to come.

Within the context of “everybody want[ing] Spirit,” there is also a large percentage of “unwilling Spiritualists”. Persons tend to be unwilling to embrace the lifestyle of a Spiritualist for two main reasons; (1) the austere demands of the Spirit, and (2) the stigma attached to it. These two factors are not unrelated. One woman related to me that she consciously sat at the back of the Church she had been directed by the Spirit to attend, because she did not want any position. Having a position in the church would mean a change of dress code and she loved to “dress hot.”²¹ Another woman, Sister D confessed that having indulged in fleshly lusts for a brief period (about a month), she had gone to church. She seated herself towards the back of the Church. The church service was about to begin when the pastor suddenly appeared from her office. With a vicious anger, the Pastor started chastising “in language” (glossolalia), when the congregation parted to give her free way,

she walked on benches, and pushed others out of her way until she got to Sister D. The pastor grabbed her and dragged her to the front of the church, where she immediately made a makeshift healing tent with sheets and proceeded to “baat” (spiritual bathing) Sister D giving her medicine to drink also. The medicine was to induce vomiting and when Sister D would not vomit, the Pastor began vomiting herself as a way of ridding Sister D of the negative energy that she had picked up from her sexual escapades. About a year after this incident, Sister D was commissioned to use the embarrassing episode as testimony to the wiles of the devil.

In Sister Hunter’s case, both the demands of the Spirit and the stigma of having Spirit proved too much for her to bear. In my initial interview with Sister Hunter, I was very surprised at how much she would put herself down. When I complimented her on her teaching career, she would say that she had not taught at any of the more prestigious schools; and when I commented on the different elements of her healing service, she seemed embarrassed at not having seen the service in the same way. When Sister Hunter asked me to explain my mission to her church, I told her that I was researching Revival so it could be better understood and appreciated. Both she and her mother thought that this was an effort in futility. Mother Wright asked me why I had not chosen to do something with mathematics or some other more lucrative research. She admonished me for studying Revival for a Ph.D. and actually advised that I should stick to herbalism, because there was more money to be made from researching herbs.

I was to learn later, that Sister Hunter had gotten a promising job in corporate Jamaica, but was forced to give it up because the Spirit made such huge demands of her. With the stigma attached to her calling, she could not tell her co-workers that she was a

healer; and therefore could not explain that she had to leave work early everyday because the Spirit demanded that she be home by a certain time. Neither could she explain that the reason she frequently passed out at work was because she had failed in some duty to the Spirit. She had the same problem at her teaching job. In fact she has been unable to keep a job of any substance, and ended up resigning in embarrassment at having had another “seizure” on the job.

The Spirit demands of Sister Hunter that she work full time in the Church and Healing Ministry. But as noted from the foregoing paragraphs, she is no longer enamored by the Spiritual life. When I explain that she can live a spiritual life as well as follow her temporal dreams, she refuses to listen, ashamed of her lot in life. She counters my argument by saying that she wants to go on to get a Masters and even a Ph.D., and she wants to teach at the highest institutions of learning in the country; to date she does not know of one Spiritualist who has been able to do this. She goes on to cite a long list of pejorative names that persons as herself bear. She considers herself, her lifestyle, her beliefs and her experiences condemned by the very institutions she desires to be a part of. Her dream of being both a Spiritualist and a University lecturer seems an impossible dream in Jamaica.

Sister Wright has a mother’s heart and she feels her daughter’s pain. Although she considers it foolhardy for anyone to be “vex wid God” for an extended period, she knows that her daughter, one of the brightest girls in the community, has been through a lot. Her own call to the ministry demanded a radical change in lifestyle after being “slain in the spirit” for two weeks. Having led a spiritual life for over fifteen years now, she feels that much of the stigma attached to Revival and Obia stems from the occult nature of the traditions. She agrees with Modda K that “is di secret around Obia dat give it a bad name.” In this respect

Sister Wright is correct. Persons in the village looking on may conclude that “smaddy Obia Sister Hunter.” However, those close to her know that she “get a spiritual lash”. In fact was said of Sister Hunter that “she Obia herself” because she is being chastised for disobedience. Obia has endured the stigmatization attendant to most arcane systems of knowledge. The occult nature of Obia does make for its misinterpretation and misrepresentation; but as the following stories show, it also makes for spiritual malpractice. The secret malpractice fuelled by demonization makes the “wicked art” of Obia a self fulfilling prophecy.

Iniquity Working by “The People Who Yuh Least Expect”

Jamaica is indeed an Obia factory. In this Obia Factory however, there is no apparent system of regulation, no general manager to oversee the running of the plant; no workers union by which to regulate hours and remuneration; and no customer service department to file complaints. The quality of the products manufactured by this Obia factory is a matter of individual taste. An individual who chooses to “wear” a particular product for his own welfare may simultaneously (and unwittingly) cause the demise of another. The problem of Obia as “iniquity working” is one that fortunately or unfortunately, simultaneously invokes and negates Obia as “powerful healing.” The self-same Spirit is worked toward affliction as well as cure; the self-same Spirit is used to harm and to heal. The following narratives provide insight into the pervasiveness of what is referred to “evil doing”, “iniquity working” or “working Obia” and the constancy of “powerful healing” conceptualized positively as “working the Spirit” in Jamaica.

Judith Blank is a lecturer at one of Jamaica’s two premier Universities. Her daughter who was away in foreign (Miami) studying law on a well deserved scholarship had suddenly gone mad; in addition to which Judith had been turned down for promotion three times in the past two years. Judith found her way to Modda B, a ’60 Revivalist to find out what the matter was. She

was told that she and her daughter were under some “strong strong Obia” and rituals were done to remedy the situation. These rituals which involved bringing the daughter back to Jamaica for final rites served to convert an unbelieving husband and father. After her daughter’s recovery, Judith found herself back at Modda B insistent on securing the names of those who had Obiaed her. Modda had declined to tell Judith, as directed by The Spirit, to prevent retributive action by this irate and vengeful client. On her return to Modda, Judith not only insisted on getting the names of her attackers, but she also wanted to go to an Obiaman who would “send back di blow”, because Modda B had refused this request.

Judith was unrelenting and eventually Modda was directed to take her to Obiaman X under certain conditions. Judith was simply to go for a reading, (a kind of second opinion) and allow the Obiaman to direct her on the best course of action. Judith agreed to these conditions and they proceeded to the consultation. Modda B, in relating this story took time to pause and shake her head as she remembered how she got the “shock of her life” when Judith within seconds of being seated simply went into her handbag, produced a long list of about eighteen names coupled with wads of thousand dollar bills and promptly told the Obiaman what she wanted done to each. Modda B looked at me sadly, shook her head and said, “I asked her, what is all of that for?” And again “Claudette, what is all of that for? Is the people who you least expect, a University lecturer.”

It is the people who you least expect to find at the Obiaman who sometimes end requesting the most abominable services. I have been to shrines where spiritualists have taken time out to point out certain people to me. “You know is who dat?” Or “you know what kind of work that one do?” And yes, it is often shocking to both the client and practitioner when “the people who you least expect” often show up in surprising ways.

Of the many refrains I have heard among Jamaican spiritualists, there are two which I am prone to recall often. The first I heard from a Modda in St. Ann who was forced to offer a stern sermon to those in the waiting room when a client burst out crying on being told that a close family member was the source of her ailments. “Is di people close to you, you must look for; is not no stranger ah Obia oonu, is di people close to you”. The second refrain comes by way of a Kingston spiritualist who, prior to my visit, had just completed a number

of work related cases. “Look to those above you”, she chanted “look to those above you, is those above you who feel threaten, is dem a Obia yuh.” One Modda related to me how a young girl came to her deathly ill. She had cause to visit the home in order to remedy the situation. According to her, she took a group of about five persons with her to work the case, which involved sweeping out the house. When she got to the yard and “read up” the yard, she was reduced to tears:

Ah bust out a bawl. [I burst out bawling] Girl from I born I never see nothing like dat. Is a family land. Modda ah Obia son. Bredda ah Obia sister. Daughter ah Obia Modda. Uncle ‘gainst niece. Niece ah Obia aunty. Girl I tell you. Never see nothing like dat. Ah tek di whole a dem an baat dem. Ah baat di whole family. Girl I tell you...

At later point in the narrative Modda declared, “you know what? Dis Obia business naw stop. Poor people naw stop Obia dem one anodda, ‘cause if a poor man have \$50 him reach a Obiaman.”

At another shrine, on another occasion, I happened to be present when a prominent member of the Jamaican society came for a reading. At the end of the reading, she stumbled through the door in shock, and came to sit beside me outside on the bench. She shook her head, “girl ah caan believe weh di man just tell me! Ah can believe! Him just describe di man who bruck mi foot. Him describe di man dung to di T. Claudette you would never believe!” But she told me who, and I believed. I had by that time been in too many shrines. Frequent targets of “spiritual blow” are returning residents; those who have been abroad for decades and return to Jamaica to live on their family property. Quite frequently these unsuspecting Jamaicans who return to their communal roots “just drop dead so.” It is for this reason that many returning residents, being forewarned, end up purchasing and living on properties far from their original communities. Further, hard working Jamaicans who “doan frequent farin”

but who manage to be socially mobile are “implied”²² Obia workers. It is assumed that “dem have dem Obia man” who is assisting them to “step up in a life.” After all, in a post-slavery, post colonial society, nothing is ever what it seems and Obia is both healing and protection. So, yes, between “those who you least expect” and the demonized poor, Obia malpractice thrives at all levels of the society.

While the focus on Obia malpractice has served to illustrate the complexity of Obia, the stories of healing Godpractice are equally moving and equally compelling. In fact, one realizes that the two types of stories are but different aspects of the same phenomenon, they are stories about the use of Spirit. Within the milieu of spiritual warfare and “iniquity working” Obia malpractice has a decidedly gendered component. An in-depth gender analysis of Obia is indispensable to a proper understanding of Obia on Jamaica soil, but this exposition is outside the scope of the present scholarship. The gendered aspect of Obia practice can be summed up in the phrase “Men Kill and Women Heal” or alternately “Men tricksters; Women Healers.” Most Informants insisted that Obiamen would invariably want to “send back blow”, while Obia women “heal wid protection.”

Men Kill: Women Heal

Janice, a middle class older female who has been to numerous practitioners over the course of her life, told me that “the Obia men always tell mi say is somebody doing something to me and ask me if me want him to kill the person. When a go to Modda, she just give me medicine fi heal me and protect myself.” As Wedenoja (1989) observed, female spiritualists in Jamaica are considered the “Great Mother[s] of Understanding” as they engage in psychotherapy, find missing persons, assist in job security and perform a multiplicity of functions which serve to alleviate undue suffering. “Mothering [is] the Practice

of Balm” and these spiritualists consider themselves Spiritual Scientists. In establishing balmyaad to soothe and provide relief and solace, they affirm to suffering Jamaicans that there is a “balm in Gilead”; and invoking the energy of Jesus, the great biblical Obiaman along with those of their ancestors, they provide for their clients confidence in the fact that “the great physician now is near”. The multiplicity of Spirit pathographies attest to this.

In the main, female spiritualists are considered to be good practitioners, while the men (more prone to be called Obiaman) are viewed as more powerful and wicked. Moddas often take their clients to see Obiamen who provide services outside of their own calling. Most Moddas consider themselves physicians or healers and tend not to provide the more “social” services having to do, for example, with legal matters. Such are the legendary shrines of Obiamen that they will have their own extortionists and middle men who clients have to pay in order to get a reading, before they get to the Obiaman, whose charges are already astronomical. Modda X who bemoans the exorbitant fees charged by Obiamen as well as their propensity for evil, told me about a conversation she once had with P. P, a once famous Obiaman, is now a shadow of what he used to be, having been cut down by spiritual warfare. (This seems to be the lot of Obiamen who do not succumb, more often than not violently, to the powers they misuse.) Modda said she asked P what he would do if a man came to him to kill another, and the same man whom he agreed to kill came to him to kill the man who wanted him dead. P’s reply she said was cold-blooded. “I would take both of dem money and kill di two of dem. Is a business I running.” I am told of the wickedness of Obiamen who overcharge and kill at Will. While recounting numerous instances of Obia malpractice by male Science Obiamen, one Modda stated that she knew of one Obiaman who “kill ina bungle” [kill in bundles/group]. This Obiaman is a known “hit man” who

collects fees from no less than six persons at a time before he performs a single ritual by which he kills *en masse* those he has been contracted to eliminate. This is why in Jamaica it is commonly said in cases of sudden deaths that “people nuh just dead so!”

In the business of Obia malpractice, people do horrible things to each other. False pregnancies or “having belly”²³, business failures, sore foot, car accidents, attacks on children, job losses, chronic ailments, and paralysis are part and parcel of evil doing. “Evil doing” generally corresponds to either outright killing someone or “keeping them down” by a multiplicity of means. In a particular Mobay community, a certain road is designated the “Obia spot”. Eyewitnesses report that a certain teacher’s hand was amputated in a motor vehicle accident while her husband was driving her to buy groceries. A month later at this same spot, the woman was beheaded in another motor vehicle accident. She was on her way from the hospital after receiving treatment for injuries from the previous accident. The man who told me the story reported that “di ooman head chop off clean a ground...same place...everybaddy who come look say ‘ah Obia dat!’”. The Jamaican phrase to “trample him” or “walk pon him” is a literal description of Obia malpractice, where individuals walk around with the names of their enemies (perceived and/or real) in their shoes. One Portland Obiaman told how disgusted he was when “one ‘bright’ [audacious] evil working ooman come into [his] shrine trampling down pickney:”

M, a thriving Obiaman is of the '60 Revival order. He keeps church service every day before he starts his healing. During this church service he makes sure to tell those who come to request evil working to leave. Proclaiming himself someone chosen of God, he also asks evil doers to leave. On this occasion, a Thursday morning, no one left after these pronouncements. As the service continued the Spirit showed him a middle aged woman, who had something in her shoes. He immediately went to the woman, rebuked her, and told her to take off her shoes. “If you ever see the amount of pickney name weh di ooman have ina a har shoes!” He continues, “wicked!” “Weh pickney do you een, weh pickney can do you?” M got out his sibble- jack and

beat the woman furiously. When relating this story, he was still upset that this wicked woman had dared to come into his shrine. It was almost as if he felt violated by her presence. M repeatedly shook his head, sorrowing at what “people can do to pickney.”

In another variation of this practice, individuals' names are placed in a bottle and buried in a busy road. Persons who walk on the road are said to be literally walking on the person, this may include the very individual whose name is in the bottle. In this way, the individual is said to be “set to keep himself down”. On walking with an Obiawoman in the country, she saw one such bottle and agitatedly told her apprentice to “mash di bottle”, cause “di poor person must be walking ‘pon himself and don’t even know.”

“Having Operation” or Spiritual Surgery

Unless one experiences Obia, one cannot know about the “working [of] the Spirit” as the “unclean thing” and “powerful healing”. The Sci-Fi channel could benefit from a week in the shrine of a Jamaican Spiritual Surgeon. Moddas often accompany their clients to “have Operation” in order to provide emotional support. Persons generally respond with hysterics and fainting on seeing the things extracted from their bodies. One woman who went for the first time to have her Operation, on the extraction of no less than seven objects from her body, was told by the Surgeon, “you were a garbage dump.” Sean, a 46 year-old man on this his third visit to the Surgeon, sought me out after his Operation to give me a report. I had already gone in to view the various articles of hair, sponge, stones, plastics, bolts and padlocks that had so far been extracted for the day. Sean knew this, and as I returned from a short walk around the compound, he rushed excitedly toward me,

you see di big old rusty bolt weh ina di bucket? Mi dear ah outa mi head it come. Lawd God mi tink mi did a go dead when him tek it out a di right side a mi head. Mi say girl, mi did have one piece a headache, mi neva know mi did ah go live. Di headache gone now. An him tek something out a mi back too.

On another occasion at the same shrine, a middle aged male who had drawn the Death card in a reading, was so relieved by his first Operation, so overwhelmed with gratitude, so shockingly surprised by his experience, that Modda had to pull him outside and tell him that Obiamen “don’t take courtesy calls.” The man, one known to “draw long meter” was taking up the Surgeon’s time with endless expressions of gratitude which were becoming tedious. But his gratitude was testament to his relief, for the older ooman who “wanted him bad” and had secretly sworn to kill him because he constantly refused her advances, had gone to a “serious Obia man” to “work Obia pon him.”

Yet while these extractions of inanimate objects tend to produce much relief and gratitude, the narrative of those clients who are and/or have been infested with living creatures seems to me to belong in publications of another genre. Yet I will end the chapter with one such story. The point to be made from this litany of Obia malpractice, or rather the responsive refrain to this complex introduction to Obia belongs to Modda B, who asked earnestly, “what is all of that for?” What is all this Obia for? Yet Modda B’s earnest query was uttered on the same day that a young female informant, having related to me how she was saved from a fatal car crash by complying with instructions Modda B had given her, declared joyously, “tank God fi Obia!” These statements, made 100 years after Ralph Caine’s genuine desire to know “what is this Obi or Obeah?” (Caine 1908:124), among other things, attest to the fact that for both blacks and whites Obia “runs like a black thread of mischief through the known history of the race” Livingstone (1899:19). It is both the “unclean thing” and “powerful healing”; the belief that kills and the belief that cures; one man’s meat and another man’s poison. Obia is the potion that turns “ooman fool afta six o’clock” and “tun man ina maaama man”; the oil of “love me and control me.”

Obia Reigns Supreme in (chronic) Sickness and in Love

Among the different healing stories related to me, I find those having to do with legal cases, chronic physical ailments and love to be most instructive. I will provide examples of the last two here. In one instance, Maud, a sixty-year old informant related to me that twenty years prior, she was having problems finding a mate so she went to see a Modda. During divination, Modda saw a vision of her husband, who was soon to appear in life, and described him to her. After about two weeks, Maud had a dream about meeting a man who was introduced to her as her husband. The man, who fit the description Modda gave her, showed up three days later. They have been happily married for twenty years. In another instance, one young woman who had been sexually abused as a child had gone to an Obiawomen regarding a matter related to her job. She was given “brawta” (a little extra) when Modda told her that a man was soon to come into her life who would help her with a certain matter. She had not related her traumatic past to Modda, who if she saw it, did not mention it at all, but simply gave her this message. Again she was given a general description with an emphasis on his occupation and told not to “run him” like all the others. She was also told that the relationship would not be a permanent one. About two months later, she met this man, whose energy was such that she mated with him for an entire week. She “felt as if a great sea had washed over [her], and [she] was thoroughly cleansed.” After this she was able to love herself and engage in meaningful romantic relationships. She thanks Modda for the advice not to “run him” and not to expect anything permanent.

Yet “permanency” is what most Jamaicans want in love. In the foregoing tale of spiritual surgery, the older woman who was scorned unleashed her fury by seeking to have her object of affection pay the ultimate price – death. She had not sought recourse to the

various oils such as “oil a hold me” readily available at the drugstore. In Jamaica there is no shortage of potions and rituals for “holding a man” or woman. In Jamaica, the term used is “tying”, so men and women “tie-up” each other. For women this is best done by putting menstrual blood in the man’s food²⁴. I have yet to learn the most successful method used by males, though from the accounts of Cassecanarie (1895), I suspect it also involves the use of some form of DNA, perhaps sweat, saliva or hair.

The “tying” of one’s lover is the establishment of what Cassecanarie calls “psychic rapport”, and this is “one branch of Obeah extensively practiced, - especially by ladies” (1895:9). The placement of hair, perspiration and blood is cited as common practice. In the case of hair, “the exciter burns and rubs to powder a portion of his or her own hair, a pinch of which is sprinkled from time to time in the food or drink of the person to be excited.” This method “usually requires about three repetitions before the effect begins to be produced.” The use of blood is said to “have by far, the most powerful and prompt effect” and generally,

The food of the person to be excited is steamed in a cloth by the exciter, on which cloth a little, properly nine drops, of the cook’s own blood is dropped. Fresh blood is requisite. This method is almost exclusively used by women, blood drawn at certain seasons is most effective. (Cassecanarie 1895:9)

As Cassecanarie notes, these methods of establishing “psychic rapport” often result in the “compeller” having total control of their paramours, which leads to various forms of abuse. Jamaican women “have man like idiot” after they access the “oil a love me and control me”. This is one sure method of preventing themselves from being chronically abused; after all, there are already too many other chronic ailments plaguing the population.

The permanence of chronic ailments is an unwelcome aspect of Jamaican livity. In proverbial lingua, “sickness ride horse come and tek donkey go weh.” Obia practitioners have been known to alleviate chronic conditions such as fibroids, cancer, diabetes and AIDS.

One common chronic ailment is the sore foot which seems to resist all forms of biomedical treatment. This is one sure sign that a person has been subject to the powers of Obia, this is called “having foot” or “giving big foot”. The stories in genre, like that of the “implied Obia man” are endless. One Modda told me how to recognize the afflicted. She says that a person who never exposes their legs, even under the most favorable circumstances, is sure to be someone who “have foot.” Curing “big foot” is part and parcel of being a spiritual, and the researcher cannot escape witnessing these treatments. Needless to say, these Obia sores are unsightly beyond description. Viewing the manifestation of spiritual malevolence requires much much more than a strong stomach and as one Modda confesses “sometime when mi see di ting dem weh come out [of people] me meself fraid.” But despite the often frightening sightings, the Obia work must continue, for each spiritualist considers herself “on commission” – her duty is to heal.

According to one healer, her husband was enraged when a known AIDS patient started visiting her balmyaad. Modda said that she could not send the man away for he had been sent to her for healing. After providing psychotherapy for about a month, she was directed by the spirit to make a certain potion for him. The medicine which would cure him immediately would remain effective only if he became a Christian, that is, became a member of any Christian denomination of his choosing. When next the patient visited, she advised him that she was seeing him for the last time. Telling him emphatically “not to come back...[and] don’t tell anybody say mi cure you of AIDS cause is not me, is di Spirit,” she administered the medicine, explained the “sacrifice” he had to make and sent him on his way (to the great relief of her husband). In another case, a middle-aged woman, Mamsey, told me how she had been diagnosed with fibroids and being unable to afford the surgery

recommended by her doctor, had sought the services of a Balm healer. According to Mamsey, “she give me a bottle of medicine and told me to drink it for a week. After the week, I went to use the toilet and big clots of blood just started coming down. Ah neva need no surgery after dat.”

Indeed, one of the lessons I have learnt from “all this Obia”, is that in general, once people recognize their own power, they really do not need “no surgery after dat.” People’s recourse to external remedies stem from ignorance of self and a lack of self confidence. Jean, who according to her neighbors is a “good ooman-- a kind ooman dat” and in the words of one young man, “ah wish ah did have a modda like dat”; related to me her own unwitting “experience” with Obia. She had for neighbors, a couple who unbeknownst to her were jealous of her and her children’s comparatively greater success. These neighbors would send their grandson for ice and offer to pay for it, Jean would politely refuse. They would also present themselves in the vicinity of her gate when she was ready to leave for work and beg a ride, subsequently offering to pay, Jean would politely refuse. After months of trying these and various other means of getting Jean to take money from them, they gave up. Jean went to bed one night and dreamt that she was outside in her yard gardening when the husband passed and unable to contain himself, walked into her driveway and declared angrily “yuh a work Obia, yuh a work Obia, cause look from when wi a try fi Obia yuh and it nah work.” Jean turned to him and calmly said, “yes mi a work Obia, see mi Obiaman dem yah”, and pointed to her two knees. She then said to me, “any problem yuh have – a situation, a person, whatever, yuh must knee dem, knee dem; not’ing nuh beat prayer.” Jean had unwittingly protected herself by the power of kindness and the power of prayer; the power of deeds and the power of words – according to Crowley “the Obeah and the

Wanga.” According to her, we all have enemies and “yuh fi pray to God fi show yuh yuh enemy dem.”

In tending to the spiritual welfare of their clients, Obia practitioners have to contend with the reality that “Good and Evil are one.” Moddas understand that the same practitioners who can make the guards, supply the mercury and “sweep out the house” are the same ones who “send back blow” and “kill ina bungle”. These “Obi Negroes” charm, harm and calm; and as one informant casually observed, these Obia Doctors “mek you know youself.” This self knowledge comes either from general divination, or from being the object of malevolence. Jean, in the absence of affliction, came also to know herself as one protected from neighbors by neighborliness. Others afflicted or not, reject the knowledge that comes from spiritual experience, preferring to pretend that “dis Spirit business ah foolishness” while secretly hoping for some clarity on their occult experiences.

Yet Obia practitioners believe that in a sense on is endowed with “spirit competence”; that everyone has some real sense of the otherworld. When one young Revivalist boldly said to me “everybody know Spirit, the average person have spirit [spiritual experiences], but they are afraid of it, they don’t want to deal with it”, I thought to myself that she was mistaken. The average person did not seem to “know Spirit.” But I eventually came to realize that people will “confess” and “give testimony” to their Spirit experiences if they have a sympathetic audience. I have found that when one opens an open conversation about Spirit, one comes to find that “the average person [does] have Spirit.” How one negotiates her spirituality is another matter. Those who know and understand their power utilize it, and one domain in which this outlawed Obia practice thrives, is none other than the House O’Law itself.

Power Dynamics in the Jamaican House O'law

In 2004, two-hundred and forty-four years after Tacky and his men died, fighting for freedom on the Obia-Oath, a prominent Kingston judge, Justice K, in utter frustration at verdicts she was “being forced to hand down” begged her staff to tell her, “who is Miss B?” Upon hearing about Miss B’s legendary powers, she ordered them to take her to Miss B. Initially mortified at the excess of Volvos entering her yard, Miss B admitted to being pleasantly surprised at the deference shown to her by Justice K. She granted her an audience. Cross-country to her east, Justice K’s colleague, Judge X, even more frustrated and terrified at the happenings in his courthouse, decided to visit a Revival Modda. Sitting incognito in Modda D’s reading room, he declares, “everybody a come ina mi courtroom wid Obia, mi need fi get some Obia tuh!”

Somewhere in Jamaica, at this very moment, an Obia practitioner is performing “outlawed rituals”– illegal spirit rituals aimed at perverting the *injustice* meted out daily by the “big man” in Jamaican courtrooms to self-identified victims of oppression and poverty. Outlawed in June 1760 at the height of the Tacky rebellion, Obia remains a law unto itself. Tacky’s descendants crying “Babylon release di chain but dem a use dem brain” (Tricky “Lyrics of Fury”), are still actively engaged with issues of *injustice*. Now judge, jury as well as Obiaman, they have traded the battlefields of St. Mary for local and international courtrooms; and utilizing traditionally opposed systems of power, they battle daily to enforce conflicting rules of law. Frequent declarations of “Obia win di case”, point to the fact that from its very foundation, Obia has been a critique of and a weapon against *injustice*. The following courthouse narratives expose a Theology and Ethics of Obia which problematizes its demonization as aggressive and/or destructive use of power. The stories

show that practitioners consider the context of the oppression as the primary catalyst for criminality and as such they blame the community or “the system” as opposed to the individual for many acts which are (wrongfully) considered crimes. The perpetual struggle against “the system” means that “behind (almost) every successful case, is a good Obiaman.”

Courthouse narratives related to me include a fair variety of cases, influences and outcomes which incorporate “exotic” aspects of the Obiaman’s influence as reported in the trope of dressed-up frogs and chickens, animals with padlocked mouths and the intimidating presence of the Obiaman. Obiamen who argue their case in the spiritual realm and manifest their verdict in the temporal court, are expert spiritualists whose mode of success is often far more sophisticated and effective than the obvious intimidation of witnesses, judge and jury. These spirit masters possess the power to change evidence, time and date; to cause delays and make evidence disappear; to speak through the mouth of the judge and witnesses, and to (favorably or unfavorably) change the appearance of parties to the case. The Obia man’s influence in the courthouse can often be damaging to a system which renders verdicts based on the concept of “reasonable doubt.” While Jamaican spiritualists generally “work” on legal issues, there are Obia practitioners who specialize in court cases. It is these Obia Lawyers in particular who Thomas Banbury acknowledged “not only works at home on the case but goes to the court with his client for the purpose of stopping the mouth of the prosecutor and his witnesses and of influencing the judge and jury” (Banbury 1895 quoted in Williams 1932:94) The Obia practitioners’ self-proclaimed administration of justice and “perversion of injustice” rests on the African concept of the “community bearing a crime”, and these

“Jamaicans for Justice” are by and large considered much more effective, much more reliable and much more capable than the nine year-old newcomer on the block.²⁵

The Obia practitioner in his legal role.

In their role as holistic healers, Obia practitioners are multi-disciplinary experts who wear many hats. As professionals in a justice system, their shrines constitute a Legal Aid Clinic; and they assume many roles in the community as the situation demands. These include Justice of the Peace; Arbitrator; Lawyer/Legal Counsel; Parole Officer; Bailiff; Judge and Police. The services of the Obia Lawyer are retained in all types of cases, from petty theft to murder. Drug crimes, rape, armed robbery, fraud, various types of assault and property – land/housing issues are among some of the more frequent cases. Because of the occult nature of the practice, one is rarely privy to the rituals used. On one visit to a self-proclaimed Science physician, there was a pile burning in the yard which had a certain stench. The Science physician told me he was burning a black chicken as work on a court case -- that was as much as he said. On visits to the various reading rooms of Revival practitioners I often see pictures of clients amidst various different colored candles. The pre-independence literature which details arrests and trials of Obia practitioners provides the best detailed accounts of Obia rituals. Thorton (1904) gives one detailed example from a case he adjudicated:

A young man who had broken into a shop of a neighbouring village went to an Obeahman named Clarke to get him out of his trouble, and to prevent the police from catching him. Clarke told him not to fret at all, and that he would give him something so that the police shouldn't catch him. The young man then stated that “Clarke took down a paper parcel and threw something from it over my head. It was something like fine ashes. He was jumping about and speaking in a language I didn't understand. He told me to jump and while he jumped I jumped too. He then gave me a canister of water to put to my nose and say “God Save the Queen.” I did so. He gave me then a black power to put in the water I drank and the food I ate. He said it would carry away the

policeman who caught me. I paid him two shillings. He also gave me a tin of water to throw away at the crossroads. (264)

From this we see the ritual use of simple pharmacopoeia which includes a crossroads; water; powders and “word power and sound.” The jumping may also signal a counteraction ritual. The original Obeah Act gives us some indication of materials considered “instruments of Obeah” which includes Blood, Feathers, Parrots’ Beaks, Dogs’ Teeth, Alligators’ Teeth, broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum and Egg-Shells. The Obiaman for the most part, makes use of simple and naturally occurring elements. For this reason the plantocracy found it unfortunate that “in too many instances more potent agents are not wanting to his hand.” (Williams 1932:197) The Obia man’s general stock in trade – his lizard bones, candles, hair, duck’s skull and tarot cards, are all powerful pharmacopoeia with which he controls the Jamaican House O’Law.

Obia and the House O’Law.

In 1904, Leslie Thorton, Esq in a discourse on the effects of the 1898 Amendment to the Obeah Act; stated boldly that “the age of the Obeah man like that of chivalry has passed” (262). Thorton, himself a judge, bemoans the fact that

a common occasion on which resort is had to an Obeahman is when there is some pending litigation, civil or criminal. In such cases, one of the parties approaches the Obeahman with the view of getting him to exert his influence over the other party or his witnesses, or even the police or the judge, and so to bring success to his side. (263)

For him the latest amendment of the 1760 *Acts of Assembly* which sought to “to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes, going under the Appellation of Obeah Men and Women” would with his suggested amendments, with “little

doubt, lead before long to the Obeahman and his mysterious performances passing into oblivion” (270).

In fact, neither massa’s day nor the Obiaman’s day was done. The craft of the Obiaman flourished alongside the cult of the Obiaman. Decades earlier, in the 1870s (See, for example, Udal 1915 and Williams 1932), Kabbalistic literature had begun to appear in the Obiaman’s repertoire. Eleven years after, in 1915, the court could confirm by title, the new set of powers employed by the Obiaman, when *The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses* was found among the spiritual repertoire of an accused Kingston Obiaman (Hogg 1961). Far from passing into oblivion, the Obiaman and his mysterious performances blossomed into indispensability.

One hundred and three years after Thorton’s article, I am sitting in the shrine of an Obiaman, when the general conversation turned to the subject of Obia workers²⁶. One client who was sent a “bad blow” by a jealous family member turned to his conversant and declared, “Lawd mi dear, dem [Obiaworkers] worse dan di gun man dem.” On asking a Kingston based Revival Modda if the stories of pad-locked frogs and dressed-up chickens were true, I received the following answer:

High Science, higher Science, high Science girl! Judge siddung ina dem chair and caan get up, bull frog ina court, yes all kin’ a tings. Well right now di lawyer dem tell yuh straight (just like di docta dem); “go get some Obia! Cause di people dem a kill wi wid Obia dung a court. We alone caan do it.” So if yuh hire yuh lawyer and give im \$200,000, yuh hire di Obiaman same way and gi him \$200,000/\$300,000. Two a dem work di case. Straight!

References to the Obiaman and the lawyer ‘work[ing] di case straight’ can be found throughout the Obia literature. For example, in 1894, four years before said amendment, Thomas Banbury, a missionary, had cause to lament the fact that the Obiaman “is a professional man that is as well paid as the lawyer or doctor, and sometimes better. It is a

well known fact that in cases of lawsuits the Obeah man is retained as well as the lawyer” (Banbury 1894: 101). In 1873, Charles Rampini, in *Letters from Jamaica*, noted the existence of the “Jamaicans for Justice” Obia Guild.

The Obeah man or woman is one of the great guild or fraternity of crime. Hardly a criminal trial occurs in the colony in which he is not implicated in one way or another. His influence over the country people is unbounded. He is prophet, priest, and king of the district... His pretensions are high; but he has the means at hand to enforce them. He can cure all diseases; he can protect a man from the consequences of his crimes; he can even reanimate the dead. His knowledge of simples is immense. Every bush and every tree furnishes weapons of armoury... He sometimes visits the courts of petty sessions throughout the island, if some unfortunate client of his who has got into trouble requires his aid to defend him. (Rampini 1873: 131)

The average Jamaican defendant therefore employs at minimum a two-member legal team composed of two lawyers – one Spiritual, the other temporal. Such a defendant may also benefit from the Spirit Legalists of friends, well-wishers and relatives. Sometimes up to as many as three Obia men are employed by one person. A middle-aged male informant told me that he used three Obia men on a case of robbery. The matter was solved and he is happy, but he could not say which one worked or whether success was achieved from the combined effort.

Helping an “unfortunate client... who has got into trouble” often requires “stopping the mouth of the prosecutor and his witnesses” as a means of “influencing the judge and jury.” Policemen serve as main witnesses for the prosecution and, as such, they are both clients and targets of the Obiaman. Policemen are notorious for “no shows” in court cases and many Jamaicans attribute this to the “slackness of de system.” Yet, those “who know” understand that the myriad causes of absenteeism “a nuh jus’ so.” The car breaking down, sudden illness, an emergency are more obvious and seemingly natural occurrences. But the bad dreams or terrible visions sent by the Obiaman, as well as the warning dreams/visitations

from ancestors cause many a police personnel to reconsider the value of “bearing witness”. At the turn of the 20th century when Obia practitioners were still being persecuted, many a policeman found his “name pon parchment paper” among the instruments of Obia gathered at a crime scene. His Honour J. S. Udal who served in The Leeward Islands, relates the 1904 case of a Nevis Obiaman named Timothy Dasent. He notes that in this principal case an unusually long list of “instruments of Obeah” was produced. Much amusement was derived from the fact that Dasent refused to touch a number of the items, stating that “he would rather die than touch them with his hand” (Udal 1915:275). It followed that “Letters and a piece of paper were found at the house and although the defendant seemed unconcerned about the letters,

it was stated that he had strenuously endeavoured to resist the sergeant’s taking possession of a piece of paper which he had discovered in a drawer, and upon which he found his own name written in full: “Henry James Green.” The defendant seized it with one hand and tried to disfigure it, but with the help of two other constables the sergeant managed to retain possession of it. In all probability it was intended as a charm to work the spell of “overlooking” the sergeant, who was the head of the local police in Nevis, so as to prevent him from carrying out his duty. From some of the questions asked the defendant in cross-examination it would seem that he had also been engaged in a similar attempt against the prosecuting counsel! (Udal 1915:275)

The Obiaman then, in “resisting the system” employs all “weapons of armoury” at his disposal in order to influence every person who represents an obstacle to his cause.

Both Udal and Thorton as officers of the Bench admit that the ‘fear and awe’ of the Obiaman is deterrent to obtaining direct evidence for his prosecution. Thorton who points to “the very questionable practice of tricking obeahmen into working obeah by sending to them police agents in the disguise of persons genuinely seeking the obeahman’s help” (Thorton 1904:270), recommends a lesser punishment for the Obiaman’s client as a means of

securing more arrests of Obia practitioners. Today's lack of prosecution of Obia practitioners points to changes in the social structure, which has led to the decriminalization of Obia in some Caribbean countries. While the original 1760 Act declares death or transportation for "any Negro or other Slave, who shall pretend to any supernatural Power", Mbiti asserts "mystical power is not fiction: whatever it is, it is a reality, and one with which African peoples have to reckon... everyone is directly affected, for better or for worse, by beliefs and activities connected with this power" (Mbiti 1969:198). The effect of mystical power "for better or worse" is seen in the verdicts handed down in Jamaican courts.

Intimidation/Dismissal/Acquittal

When the Obia practitioner puts on his "law-suit" and steps into court, he tends to instill fear and awe. More often than not though, he is dressed in normal attire and is not obviously "working" anything, yet his very presence is cause for concern. Some practitioners are actually friends with various officers of the court. One Obiaman in Northwestern Jamaica, told me that when he goes to a certain court, the policemen take turns guessing who his client/s are for the day. The presence of the Obiaman along with the ritual use of animals such as frogs, lizards, mongoose and chickens, all work to intimidate parties to the case, inside and outside of the courtroom. Newall relates a story told to her by a Jamaican expatriate.

A Johncrow, a type of carrion bird...walked into court "dressed up to the nines". In fact it was wearing a collar and tie. Normally these birds dislike people and fly away as soon as they see anyone. On this occasion the bird appeared, settled down, and made a noise which sounded something like "Davis", the name of one of the litigants. *Everyone was horrified by the apparition, and the Judge dismissed the case.* (Newall 1978: 31) (emphasis mine)

In an alternate version of this phenomenon, “a frog’s mouth was fitted with a padlock. It is said to have actually sat on the benches with the general public, watching the proceedings. Those who saw it assumed that it was a “cook-up frog” and were filled with terror.” (31) These examples represent the more aggressive manifestation of Obia work which I am told is used more generally in tough cases. By and large, the Obiaman utilizes less obvious and terrifying means.

Getting Bail:

“High, higher, high science” is very costly, and in very difficult cases, where “higher, high science” is required to secure acquittal and the client is unable to pay, getting bail is often the next best remedy. When such bail is achieved, it is understood that the client will jump bail, often disappearing to “country”, North America or a “small island.” One older male informant told me the story of his soldier friend who got arrested for murder on circumstantial evidence. The soldier was in a night club one Friday night when “shooting broke out.” During the confusion, his firearm was stolen and used to shoot a patron. Said patron was his neighbor with whom he had recently quarreled. The entire community declared the soldier innocent and said the neighbor’s family framed him through “badmind.” The evidence was too strong and the neighbors were working Obia, so he and his friends went to a “bigger” (more powerful) Obiaman for help. Given the circumstances, he could only secure bail, and when bail was secured he and his friends spirited the soldier out of the country.

However, while securing bail in certain instances often reflects pecuniary issues or seriousness of charges, it may also signal the level of expertise of the Obia practitioner assigned to the case. The Science Obiaman tends to specialize in legal matters; however,

Balm healers/physicians also “work” court cases. Because physicians are sacred healers, their influence tends to be comparatively different and/or less. For example, they will serve as psychologists for the accused and may often only “work” – the case to a certain point.

Modda X explains:

I suppose to deal only wid di siik--to heal. I don't really get di commission to work court case. I am a physician. Di spirit tell me dat not to deal wid criminal. But when di pieple dem come, mi so sorry fi dem dat mi work di case. But ah not really suppose to. So mi help dem get bail and den mi send dem elsewhere.

Sending them elsewhere may or may not involve referral to an Obia lawyer. When the defendant is incarcerated, Obia practitioners “work pictures.” They rarely visit the defendant in jail. On one occasion, I was by a balmyaad when Modda was visited by the cousin of a youth incarcerated for murder. The Spirit has not given her to work the case and her spirit was not into it, so she had been very lax about the issue, even though she was doing some “candle work” with the picture. The cousin returned for the photograph telling her that they were going to try another source. She admitted to me that she was glad, “‘cause me explain to dem she mi neva really waan work di case.” On another occasion an Obiaman told me that he had refused a case of armed robbery brought to him by the mother of a young man who was jailed. He said that on “reading up” the son, he saw that unbeknown to his mother, he was involved in far more than armed robbery. He did not consent to take the case even though the mother pleaded with him for weeks.

“Buying” Time:

The following story, related to me by an Obia practitioner, demonstrates how Obia is often used, not so much to thwart the course of justice, but to manipulate judicial time in favor of a client. The US is considered a particularly rough system to the average Jamaican. It is the

Babylon system in its fullest. Even in New York there exist spaces where one cannot “beg a bly”, “bandoloo dem way through” or “come out a face”. As the wheels of the system turn, one must be mindful not to get caught up, for surely “judgment wi tek yuh.”

A middle aged Jamaican, Paul Norris having recently lost his wife and his job within a three month period, was still finding it difficult to support himself and two children in a tough job market. Unable to pay his mortgage for a protracted period, he was in danger of losing his home. Having attended court twice on the matter, he was having a tough time getting “the system” to understand that jobs were hard to come by, that his children were almost starving and that the loss of their home would surely be a death blow to an already ailing family. Seven days prior to his final court session appearance, his mother convinced him to go and see an Obiaman. Skeptical but desperate, he made his first visit to a Scienceman and related his tale of woe. During consultation, he and the Obiaman both agreed that what he needed was time, a lot of time, to secure a good job so he could pay arrears on the mortgage or perhaps refinance his loan. He was told by the Obiaman that rituals needed to be done. He paid the cost for the rituals and still skeptical but hopeful, he also prayed for a miracle. On the day before he was due in court, he called the Obiaman to ask what he should expect at court on the following day. He was told that his case file would be missing/lost and his name absent from the court calendar. Paul went into shock on being told that his name would be absent from the court calendar. A file being lost is understandable; the civil service thrives on lost files. But a person’s name doesn’t just disappear from a court calendar; cases are allocated way in advance. Surely, the Obiaman was a charlatan. In disbelief, and even more distressed, he hung up and called his mother, lamenting the waste of money and the imminent loss of his home. He was sternly reprimanded by his mother, who was a stern believer in the spirit world and the power of Obia. She told him that had it not been for the Obiaman, he would have been dead since his teen years and she too would have been rotting in her grave. Even more distressed at his ignorance of his mother’s faith in the occult, and its possible role in his life; he suffered a sleepless night before proceeding to court.

On arriving at court, he met his lawyer and they proceeded to the Court Clerk to declare their presence. His lawyer noticed his extreme nervousness and while attributing it to his client’s fear of losing his home, he still inquired of Paul whether he was alright. Paul could only manage a weak nod of his head as the sweat began to run down his back. The docket clerk smiled and addressed Paul by name (as they had made a previous acquaintance) and scrolled down the page to check his name. The more perplexed she looked, the more nervous Paul became. “Mr. Norris, it seems you are not due to appear in court today,” she said in bemusement, “though I swear I saw your

name on the calendar yesterday, and again this morning when I again looked at it. This is very strange.” Addressing Paul’s legal counsel, she asked if he was sure of the date for Paul’s court appearance. Paul lawyer’s response was to cough at the ridiculous question. Perplexed, she went to the Judge to investigate whether his court calendar matched hers. She returned, slightly annoyed but stating that neither his name nor his file was to be found among the day’s documents, even though the Judge swore he had just seen the file in the pile he had organized on his desk. Paul was free to go. In fact he was free for two years, during which time he sorted out his affairs. When the case was eventually called, he had a new lawyer, a new Judge and a new Court Clerk. He had also embraced a new worldview, and could now make major repairs to his house.

The Obiaman neglected to disclose the nature of the rituals and whether the disappearance of name and case file was appropriately timed to instill belief in an unbeliever. The issue of the relationship between belief and healing is a perennial one. Most practitioners assert that the afflicted need not share the belief system. However, belief is usually guaranteed by client (as in mother or spouse or friend) or the referee. Healing /success occurs according to the Spirit, and the Spirit might refuse to help in certain cases of disbelief to chastise one or more of the parties involved. “High, higher high science” suggests an elevated level of Spirit Mastery, but the energies and the Spirit Master are also subject to a higher power. Nevertheless, Paul ended up “buying” some time from the Obiaman – a man who believes firmly that “bad luck worse dan Obia” and that “time longa dan rope.” Paul resorted to the most empowered man in his community; a man who understands his legacy of oppression and the often impossible dream of being good in a world which conceives of him as innately bad. Indeed, Spiritual power inspires both awe and fear causing the Jamaican Negro to believe with all his might in the spirit world.

The unshakable belief in the Spirit world is exhibited in the faithful deference paid to the Obia practitioner “upon all occasions.” As it is said in local parlance, “belief kill and belief cure”. But Obia is more than a matter of “superstitious belief” for “who feels it, knows it”;

and this experience “which teacheth knowledge” explains the seemingly unnecessary attention to Obia. Thorton (1904) who was sought to legislate the Obia man into oblivion was perplexed by the “peculiar” attitude to Obia:

The present attitude of the native mind towards obeahism is peculiar. Like the small child in the dark, who says to himself he is not afraid, and laughs at the thought, but yet flies in a panic of terror at any sudden or unaccustomed noise, so does the Jamaican regard the obeahman. He is ready to laugh and jeer at his pretensions, and even eager to report him to the police, but deep down in his heart he has a holy terror of his powers. (262)

So what is all this Obia for? The Rastafari would say that it is for “the healing of the nation/s.” Others would say that Obia is Spirit medicine, the neutral mystical power that we all access to our own elevation or peril. Most will tell you that it is evil. All these responses are true of a phenomenon cast as “the unclean thing and powerful healing.” This chapter began with a reference to Obia from the early eighteenth century. This reference comes some eighty-three years after the first enslaved Africans arrived on the island. I close with a story even more remarkable than Walduck’s reference to negroes from whom bones and shells were extracted. This story so affected Mother Cee that she “always have it in [her] mind.” It is a story about the power of healing; it explains the Jamaican’s “peculiar” attitude towards Obia; demonstrates why “everybody desperate for the Spirit”; and justifies the “holy terror of [the Obia man’s] powers.”

“Di Spirit Neva Right”: A Story about the Power of Healing

[If you were to tell a story about the power of healing and belief, what story would you tell... what is your most memorable story?]

Okay, I have this girls - years ago - and I have always had it on my mind; so then this would be the best thing now.

OM... This girl was sick. She said that at first she was pregnant. She said she was living with a man and she got pregnant and during the pregnancy she said she realized that she “have this belly” going one year until another year

until a next year and this was -- the time when she came [to me] it was four years, and she “have this belly” before her. And she had gone to a lot of places [balmyaads], many different places and she came to me, somebody whom I worked for [healed] bid her come to and so she came.

No! That is not true.

I was going to a bus stop to take a bus and I saw her and said to her that -- going around her you know, di Spirit neva right [the Spirit was not right]. I found myself like upside down, you know, you know. And I went around her two times; and I said to her “you are not right” and she laughed. And there was a girl standing beside her, and she laughed too. And she [the “pregnant” girl], said “What did you say?” And she then said, “It is true, I am really not right?” That’s what she said. {Because even now, she comes here, she has gotten rid of it, but she still comes to see me.} She said: “It is true, I am really not right.” And I was still there and I wanted to take the bus (but couldn’t), and I approached her again and insisted, I said to her “you are sick man”; and she said, “yes.” I said “What kind of sickness do you have?” And she began to tell me about “the belly” that she had. So I told her where I worked -- where I lived, and she came here one Sunday morning.

And everybody, Modda D up there and I had another girl who was staying with me -- an elder lady --a Spiritualist also -- she is in America now. Everybody got to work earnestly on her, and the Spirit started to work. And they stripped her naked in the yard {at that time the place was not as built up. I did not have the palm tree and those other trees were not yet there}. And everyone started to strip her down, and had her down on the ground working her. And then, and after that I gave her a little read [divination] and showed her that everything that she said was true. I gave her some medicine until she passed out a big lizard.

{What!}

Yes man. Very big, with a saw in his back.

And after she passed out that [the lizard], she fainted. This happened down by her house and they called me up her. (At that time I did not have telephone, but a man rode a bicycle and came to call me and told me that it happened down by Tavares Gardens). He came to call me and told me that the lady she fainted and they did not know whether or not she was dead because she had passed out a big lizard. They had put a block [building block] on the lizard. I called my regular taxi driver and he took me down there. An extremely large crowd!

And when I walked through the crowd and got to the spot, as I barely lifted up the block, the lizard flipped right onto my face you know! He sprang right into my face. And we got to burning him. A man shoved a fork (a fork similar to the one I have in the ground down there), pushed it into him you know. And it seemed as if the fork was going through iron. And the man stuck the

lizard into the ground and we threw some rum on the lizard and set him on fire.

And her belly remained bloated for about three months. It was not as big, but it continued to be bloated. And we gave her medicine and still it remained bloated. And she came again and we started to pray, you understand, we had extended prayers for her. She began to live with me because she started feeling many different types of pain. Until one early morning she was here...and she vomited. And when she vomited some things resembling intestines came out of her you know, and I became afraid. And when she vomited the things, man, after she vomited the ting, she realized that her belly started to go down (became flatter), and go down and go down, until.

She continued to drink the medicine. Then one morning the Spirit just told me to mix a glass of clay and give to her. Clay. I just went around the back and dug up some clay and I was about the heat it on the stove, because I did not understand, and I heard the Voice say to me, “don’t put it on the fire – simply mix it.” And then she started to drink. And from that moment she became better. Before this, she was darker than her normal complexion and did not look well. And she came back to her normal complexion and health. And she still came to visit me, until she finally became pregnant, she now has a child.

I have been told other stories of animals (dead and alive) “passing” out of persons. In another remarkable story, the live entity came out into a piece of blood clot which simply walked (slithered) away out of sight -- to the extreme of shock of the practitioner and other patients in the balmyaad. So Mbiti according to JamAfricans, Mbiti is right; they know that “mystical power is not fiction... it is a reality... with which African peoples have to reckon.”

Working the Spirit versus Working Obia

Obia’s radical loss of status over 400 plus years of Jamaican recent history, shows a shift from an understanding and acceptance of spiritual power as neutral (being accessible for good or bad use), to a professed rejection of all forms of spiritual duality in JamAfrican religion. Proverbs such as “what is joke to you is death to me” and “one man’s meat is another man’s poison” seem to contain a similar philosophy to that of Heraclitus who proposed that “to God all things are fair and good and right; but men hold some things

wrong and some right. Good and Evil are one” (Campbell 1972:173). The belief that “good and evil are one” is by Walduck’s observation that neutral mystical power is used by “one Negro [who] can bewitch another (Obia they call it)” and also by “that one (Obia) Witchnegro [who] can cure another” (Handler and Bilby 2001: 88). In 1710, it was accepted that the same person could both c/harm as well as cure. In twenty-first century Jamaica, this willful manipulation of neutral spiritual power is generally thought to be sinful. JamAfrican practitioners are separated from more general orthodox religion because they are perceived as utilizing spiritual power differently. Among the different denominations and sects of JamAfrican religion, the “Negro who can bewitch another” is called an “Obia worker” or “iniquity worker” while the “witchnegro who can cure another” is a “physician” or “spiritualist” one who has devoted her life to “working the Spirit.”

The roots of this dichotomy are first seen in the wars between the Maroons and the plantation slaves and the subsequent emergence of the Myal Society. Both the Maroons and the Plantation slaves practiced Obia; it was however illegal in the case of the latter. On the other hand, the Maroons were free to practice Obia and to use it specifically to curb rebellion on the plantations. For this reason the same phenomenon was considered both good and bad. When used by the Maroons to thwart rebellions, the plantation slaves considered it bad, while the Maroons and whites considered it good. The emergence of Myal as a communal Obia ceremony used to “dig up Obia” entrenched the notion of “working Obia” as individual malpractice. Missionary Christianity demonized African religious practices and served to foster the belief that the self-proclaimed “Spirit Christians” who later formed ’61 Revival group worked Obia because they practiced a more African religiosity. ’60 Revival followers consider ’61 Revival practitioners to be Obia workers; while Revivalists on a whole believe

that Mpokominya an even more African style of worship, is Obia working. Accordingly, what distinguishes “working the Spirit” from “working Obia” is both the difference between communal and individual practice, as well as the degree to which a particular person, ritual or group may be said to be African. The dichotomy also reflects the original distinction between charming and curing. Those who cure are “do good” practitioners, physicians and spiritualists; those who bewitch are “iniquity workers” and “Obia workers.” Ultimately, the more African a practice is, the more it is considered evil and the louder the accusation of Obia working. Paradoxically, the louder the accusation of Obia working, the more powerful the healing effected.

Yes! the Obia practitioner is an empowered person. Yes! “one negro can bewitch another, Obia they call it...and one [Obia] Negro can cure another.” But the effects of Obia power transcend race; and the following chapter expounds on the power of Obia to “cause problems” for whites. The historical context demonstrates that it is this power to “cause problems” which led the slavocracy to declare that Obia and evil are one. They experience of Obia led them to define Obia as more the unclean thing than powerful healing. This original designation of Obia as evil by the ruling class is still a major problem with Obia, effectively demonstrating “The politics of Caribbean Healing and Religion” *from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari*.

CHAPTER 3

A HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM OF OBIA:
THIS “BLACK THREAD OF MISCHIEF, AS POWERFUL AN AGENT AS SLAVERY”

No Negro... can do anything of this [Obia], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros.”

Walduck, 1710

Obeahism runs like a black thread of mischief through the known history of the race...[it] is a superstition at once simple, foolish, and terrible, still vigorous, but in former times as powerful an agent as slavery itself.

Livingstone, 1899

The nineteenth century was an important period for Diasporic Africans in the Caribbean. The century saw the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the eventual abolition of slavery itself on “August Morning” 1834. The last continental Africans to arrive in Jamaica for the period did so in 1867 (Schuler 1980) by which time East Indians, imported as indentured laborers beginning in 1845 were already influencing the cultural landscape as were the few Chinese immigrants who arrived via Panama in 1854 (Chang 1956). The transition from a slave society to a colonial one was difficult at best. Within the ensuing social upheaval abolitionists expressed serious concern for the religious and moral welfare of the ex-enslaved population. Among the many racist voices advocating for the upliftment of Jamaican blacks was one William Pringle Livingstone. In 1899, *Black Jamaica* presented for Mr. William Livingstone fertile ground for *A Study in Evolution*. Writing from Jamaica, Livingstone casts Blacks as a people deluded by “an ignorant and superstitious receptivity” (20) to Obeahism. Noting that “Obeahism runs like a black thread of mischief through the known history of the race” (19-20), Livingstone describes Obia as “a superstition at once simple, foolish, and terrible” (20). One hundred and sixty-nine years after it was uncovered

by the British, Obia was “still vigorous,” but this vigor signaled a decrease in Obia’s potency, for “in former times [it was] as powerful an agent as slavery itself” (Livingstone 1899: 20-21). Obia was so “powerful an agent” that the authorities had outlawed it.

Some one hundred and thirty-nine years before, in 1760, the practice of Obia was criminalized. Obia was outlawed on the account that it played a pivotal role in slave rebellions. On several occasions throughout Jamaica’s history, this “black thread of mischief” was reported to have been eradicated. Decades before Livingstone’s remarks, we hear that “the spell of Obeism and its kindred abominations is broken, and the enchantment dissolved” (Phillippo in 1843: 263). This was a “happy circumstance” for Baptist Missionary Phillippo and served as “further proof of the progress that the negroes have made in civilization” (263). However, this Missionary account of *Jamaica [in] Its Past and Present State* was to be questioned decades later by the Journalist Ralph Caine who cruised into the Kingston harbor in 1908. Black Jamaica seemed at best, to present a conflicting and contradictory study in evolution, as 244 years after the British invasion of the island, the conduct of the African was still, according to Livingstone, “dominated solely by the evil influences, of which Obi or Obeah was the chief” (Livingstone 1899:19).

Who is chief *Obi*? “What is this *Obi* or Obeah?” Why does *Obi* “lurk behind every pledge of faith?” What makes it “as powerful an agent as slavery?” Why does it prevail against the law? After centuries of speculation, earnest inquiries and multiple etymologies, John Anenechukwu Umeh a Nigeria, chief in the knowledge of *Obia*, offers conclusively that by Igbo definition, *Obia* is the profession of the expatriate *Dibia*. Umeh informs us that “the Igbo *Dibia* established in the Caribbeans [sic] (and America) as *Obia* man (spelt “obeah” by the English); *Obia* being Igbo name for a *Dibia* who has gone on itinerant practice in other

lands” (Umeh 1999b:28). For emphasis, Umeh continues to explain that “when an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Obia* or *Mbia* *Ogwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* profession in another land or society” (Ibid). By this definition, *Obia* practitioners are travelling *Ndibia*, a class of “Doctors without Borders.” He offers further that “in fact, this [*Obia*] used to be the order of the day in very ancient times when *Dibia* vast in the knowledge and practice of mystic travellings of *ikwu ekili* or *ikwu eli* or *ide nde* or *ibi ibuo* went to various parts of the world to provide services to suffering humanity” (28-29). Accordingly, *Obia* would seem to refer to doctor, one who “provide[s] services to suffering humanity.” Yet, the rendering of *Obia* as doctor, in the Western sense, falls woefully short of its Igbo conceptual roots.

Dibia is more than doctor. *Dibia* is more than healer; even more than diviner; inclusive of punisher, yet more than retributive agent. *Dibia* is an ally whose trade is weaponry; *Dibia* is a judge, without the need for a jury; *Dibia* is lawgiver and one who holds “Òfó (truth). *Dibia* may be perceived as a deity in his own right, for in the broad scope of his existence as the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom, she is “next to God.” In his seminal work *After God is Dibia*, John Umeh provides for us a vision of the cosmological complexity and semantic diversity of *Ndibia*:

To call him a traditional Doctor is to straightjacket him or her... 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 bones or any such single or a group of activities, would fall seriously short of the full meaning. *Dibia* is holistic and so is knowledge and wisdom. *They have no end...* (Umeh 1997:74-76) emphasis mine.

Umeh notes emphatically that “there is no such English equivalence”, and this partly explains the enduring difficulty in trying to define *Obia*. *Dibia* has “no end”—“*dibia* is the air or wind in the universe... *Dibia* is a Spirit masquerading in human flesh” (Umeh 1997:76-77). *Dibia* is

diviner, performer of sacrifices, medical practitioner, psychologist, destroyer of witches, and rainmaker. Obia therefore defines a system of occult knowledge with various specializations. The numerous Classes or Orders of *Dibia* explains the expansiveness of JamAfrican Obia, a feature that allows it to absorb from the other spirit cultures it encounters while engendering discrete “emanations” of JamAfrican religions.

In this chapter, I explore the history of the literization of Obia. I theorize that the numerous African ethnicities forced together for the first time in a hostile environment where they were identified solely on the basis of their race and enslaved status, served to transform this *Obia* profession which had parallels in other ethnic African groups. Within the context of British enslavement, the West African concept of *Obia* was transformed into “Obeah” (as transliterated and redefined by the English), and became the name by which all Africans could be liberated and healed; and conversely demonized and damned. This pan-African Obia became the term of reference for individual and ethnic rites administered by medicine men and women, spiritual healers and powerful members of all ethnicities, including European. The prevalence and continued salience of Obia practitioners throughout Jamaica’s history corresponds to the enduring need for proper healthcare and liberating spirituality. The European slave trade and slavery transformed the landscape of both the Americas and Africa by a violence that produced an inestimable amount of suffering. On both sides of the Atlantic, *Ndibia* was needed to help suffering Africans negotiate the existential crisis brought on by the trauma of the slave trade and chattel slavery.

“No Negro...can doe anything of this [*Obia*], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros” says Walduck, a British officer stationed in Barbados in 1710 (Handler and Bilby 2001). In 1789, over one hundred years into the British

plantation system, we learn that “the professors of Obi are, and always were, natives of Africa, and none other, and they have brought the science with them then to Jamaica where it is...universally practiced” (Edwards 1799:166). We learn further that “the Negroes in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor them; to these oracles they resort and with the most implicit faith, upon all occasions” (ibid). In writing on “Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora”, Douglas Chambers explains the *Dibia* spiritual role in Igbo society:

In historical Igboland, the *dibia* or *obe* was the person, usually a man, who could communicate directly with spirits...powerful and dangerous, and thus feared and respected everywhere, such “doctors” provide the most common link between the visible and invisible worlds...*dibia* combined their sacred knowledge of the spirit-world with a practical pharmacological knowledge. (1997:82)

The functions of the Igbo *dibia* and the West Indian *Obia*-practitioner are identical in that they are “responsible for ascertaining why things happen, remedying or influencing them, and punishing transgressors” (89). The *Dibia* is consulted in cases including illness, retaliation against injuries, divination, the seeking of favors and punishment for wrong doing. In *The 1789 Committee Report* the anonymous writer substantiates the fact that the brutal enslavement of Africans produced a “multitude of occasions which...provoke[d] the Negroes to exercise the powers of Obi against each other” (Edwards 1799:169), and indeed against the slavocracy. With the multiplicity of African ethnicities practicing *Obia*, the occult traditions became even more secret and mysterious.

From the very beginning, *Obia* as organic faith in spirit omnipotence was practiced in secret and surrounded by a “veil of mystery”, with “every precaution taken to conceal them from the knowledge and discovery of the white people” (Williams 1932: 111). As such, even in 1789, twenty-nine years after the enactment of the first Obeah Law, “practically nothing was known of Obeah which had already begun to threaten the white rule in Jamaica. [The whites]

were satisfied to accept it as the remnant of ‘a very celebrated religious order in remote ages’” (Williams 1932:118). Ironically, it is because Obia was indeed a “celebrated religious order” among the enslaved that the 1760 Act Obeah proved futile, for it represented an attempt to accomplish the impossible – it sought to eradicate the human will to life, health and liberty. Obia, as the religion of the enslaved was a “law in itself”, and the multiple African ethnic Obias which comprised the whole, made it a “law unto itself.” Accordingly, Obia as spiritual power and medicine became, as Caine observed, the unseen principle which informed every religious faith and which prevailed against the European legal system. Obia as a body of arcane knowledge and practice was a “vital, living force” (Williams 1932:18); a self-perpetuating liberating power which compelled the slavocracy to enact laws which attempted to eradicate its use. This law which criminalized Obia also demonized it. The “forces” which Africans relied on to negotiate the evils they suffered became redefined by Europeans as the “devil and other evil spirits”; even as African religion constituted a “mischief” with which they had to contend.

“The Obeah Act”: Clause X, Act 24, 1760

Criminalization and Demonization of African Spirituality

The drafting of “An Act to remedy the evils arising from irregular assemblies of slaves” in 1760 clearly demonstrates that Obia was as “powerful an agent as slavery” and a permanent and serious threat to the ruling whites and their plantation system. The earlier drafting of Maroon Treaties in 1739, as well as the six-month long Tacky Rebellion served as ample proof of Obia’s deadly potency. “There was a remarkable spirit about the Maroons” remarks Johnston (1910:140). A distinctive spirit which “seems to have inspired a liking and respect in the minds of the British officers fighting against them, the sympathy felt for the

‘first-class fighting man’” (ibid). This respect for and nurturing of Maroon military intelligence by the British, effectively split the organic development of Obia into two broad and competing sects – Plantation Obia and Maroon Obia. The latter had the obvious advantage during slavery as confirmed by Maroon James Downer who boasts to Kenneth Bilby that “Bakra never check pon nobody away from Maroon ina Science” [the white man did not respect any other Obia Science except that of the Maroons] (Bilby 2005:298). In spite of their deadly encounters with Obia, and notwithstanding the real threat that it posed to their capitalistic enterprise, the drafters of the 1760 *Acts of Assemblies* demonized Obia as *pretended* “communication with the Devil and other evil spirits” and *pretended* “supernatural power”, noting forcefully that is a “wicked [Negro] art”, thereby affirming through denial, Obia’s lethal force. The Act reads:

And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes, going under the Appellation of Obia Men and Women, pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil spirits, whereby the weak and superstitious are deluded into a *Belief of their having full Power to exempt them, whilst under their Protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen*: Be it therefore enacted..., That from and after the First Day of June [1760], *any Negro or other Slave, who shall pretend to any supernatural Power, and be detected in making use of any Blood, Feathers, Parrots Beaks, Dogs Teeth, Alligators Teeth, broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-Shells or any other Materials relative to the Practice of Obia or Witchcraft, in order to delude and impose on the Minds of others, shall upon Conviction thereof, before two Magistrates and three Freeholders, suffer Death or Transportation...* (Clause x, *Acts of Assembly (1769)*, Vol. I, p.55. quoted in Brathwaite 1971:162) emphasis mine

All subsequent amendments to this original Act, (there being ten over a 213 year period, with the last amendment in 1973,)²⁷ consistently demonize *Obia* while failing to define it. The writers of the slavery and colonial era while attempting to describe Obia; maintained its characterization as African witchcraft – totally different phenomenon from Obia.

The Act does not define Obia proper; it focuses instead on Obia practitioners. Yet it is inferred that Obia is “an Art”, albeit a “wicked art.” Accordingly, Obia is seen as a practiced skill or expertise. Obia men and *Obia* women are Negroes “who (pretend to) have communication with (the Devil and other evil) spirits.” Obia practitioners are therefore men and women who communicate with spirits and “who [have] supernatural power.” Consequently, Obia practice was understood by the slavocracy as expertise in communication with spirits. The Act then describes the conceptual context of this expertise in spirit communication. It describes a worldview distinguished (from that of the slavocracy) by a “belief in the full power [of spirits] to exempt them [Negroes] whilst under their protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen.” It is this belief in the omnipotence of spirits, and resulting communication with them that as of June 1, 1760 became punishable by “death or transportation.”

By 1973, the punishment for practicing Obia had changed. In the 213 years of its criminalization, no legislation prevailed against Obia, and independent Jamaica deemed that “every person practicing Obeah shall be liable to imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for a period not exceeding twelve months, and in addition thereto, or in lieu thereof, to whipping” (Government of Jamaica: 1974 Obeah Act). Obia remains undefined in this latest Act, being “one and the same meaning as ‘myalism.’” Further, an Obia practitioner or “‘a person practicing obeah’ means any person who, to effect any fraudulent or unlawful purpose, or for gain, or for the purpose of frightening any person, uses, or pretends to use any occult means, or pretends to possess any supernatural power or knowledge.” An “Instrument of Obeah” refers to “anything used, or intended to be used by a person, and pretended by such person to be possessed of any occult or supernatural power.” From the

penalty of death or transportation to imprisonment or hard labor, Obia practitioners have become recognized by the Law as Occultists, not simple persons who “pretend to supernatural power.” This re-cognition however is veiled within the continued negative stereotyping of JamAfrican Occultism as cultural and religious site characterized by fraud and terrorism. Accordingly, after nearly 500 years after Africans were brought to the New World and brutally terrorized into inhuman subservience, the phenomenon undefined as Obia by the slavocracy maintains its designation as a dubious and shadowy practice.

Historical Overview

In 1517, the Spanish settlers, well on their way to exterminating the indigenous Tainos of Jamaica, received *asiento* (assent) from King Charles V for human trafficking in Africans at 4,000 per year.²⁸ When the trans-Atlantic commercial trade in African bodies became formalized in 1518, Negroes were already in Jamaica. The first (documented) cargo of Africans arrived in Jamaica in 1517 by the way of Genoese merchants in 1517; and the British at whose hands the trade exploded exponentially entered the trade in 1562 (Phillippo 1843:154) and brought their first enslaved Africans to the island when they invaded it in 1655. The social landscape of Jamaica changed drastically at the hands of the British who were bent on making the island profitable with the introduction of a plantation economy. They needed cheap labor for this project; and turning their eyes eastward they engaged in an unparalleled assault upon humanity and liberty of West and West Central Africans. With this barbaric dehumanization of the African they crossed the *Kalûnga* line²⁹ and by engaging in an unprecedented trade in human beings, they exposed themselves to oceans of Obia.

By their own accounts, European encounter with Obia did not begin in the New World. Those charged with acquiring human cargo were among the first to experience and

report the powerful effects of African spirituality. Europeans acknowledged the protracted trade in African bodies as a crime against humanity and many denounced the methods of acquiring and transporting the enslaved. Noting that “the means by which they [slaves] were obtained were in the highest degree unlawful and unjust,” Phillippo describes the perpetrators as inhuman fiends who accomplished their purposes by “violence, fire, and every other instrument of devastation and murder which sagacity could contrive, or the lust of avarice prompt. Every tie, human and divine, was violated” (Phillippo 1843: 155). This gross violation of every human and divine tie is demonstrated in the fact that

nobles and princes were severed from their tribes and territories; husbands, wives, and children from each other. They were barbarously manacled, - driven like herds of cattle to the sea-shore, oftentimes at a distance of some hundred miles, exposed to the burning heat and pestilential atmosphere of their sunburnt land, and then crowded into the holds of slave-ships. (ibid)

There were consequences to this dehumanization of the enslaved, and the repercussions were oftentimes so extraordinary and frightening that those who experienced them “signed a *procés verbal* of these incidents.”

In the following eyewitness account, a captured negress bound for the French West Indies in 1696 “ate the heart” of some of her fellow inmates. On being “punished” for these acts, she retaliated by doing the same to the ship’s surgeon who was said to die in “great agony”. As further proof of her powers, she offered a challenge to the ship’s captain who returned her to land after she also “ate” the inside of a watermelon he had hidden and securely locked in a coffer. Although in this case, the “suffering humanity” liberated was the accused negress and “two or three others whom she named”, the account proves the use of occult power as an agent of liberation among captured Africans even before they arrived in the West Indies. The officers and crew of the ship signed to this general account:

Mons Le Compte de Gennes, commanding a squadron of the King's ships, having taken the Fort of Goree (West Coast of Africa), in 1696, loaded two of his vessels with negroes whom he found in the captured English Factory, and sent them off to the French West India Islands. One of these vessels had some negroes on board who were highly skilled in the '*sciences diaboliques*:' who, to escape the voyage, *so effectively delayed the vessel, that with a fair wind she was unable to accomplish in seven weeks, the distance she usually covered under like conditions in forty-eight hours...* such an extraordinary event frightened the officers and crew, who were unable to discover the cause of this mysterious delay, or to devise a remedy for it. Water and provisions began to run short, the mortality among the negroes increased to such an extent, that they had to throw a part of them overboard. Some of them complained while dying of a certain negress, who they said was the cause of their death, because, since she had threatened to eat their hearts, they had been driven to despair by severe pains. The captain of the vessel caused the bodies of several of those negroes to be opened, when they found their hearts and livers *dry, and full of air-bladders*, while the rest of the organs were in the ordinary state.

After some consideration, the captain had the accused negress made fast to a gun, and severely flogged, to make her confess the crime she was charged with. *As she did not appear to feel the blows*, the Surgeon of the vessel believing that the Prevot did not apply the cat properly, took it himself, and struck several blows with all his strength. The negress still showed no signs of feeling any pain, and asked the Surgeon why he ill-treated her so, without reason or right: and said she would make him repent it, and would eat his heart. About three days afterwards the Surgeon died in great agony, and on holding a post mortem examination, they found his *parties nobles* as dry as parchment.

When this happened, the captain did not know what to do. He could have strangled the negress, or thrown her overboard, but he feared she was not alone, and that by doing so the rest might be driven to the last extremities. He concluded to treat her well, and made her the finest promises in the world, provided she would cause her devilments to cease. They negotiated, and agreed, and if he would put ashore, with two or three others whom she named; *she would make the vessels go*; and to show the officer a little more of what she could do, she asked him if he had any fruit. He told her they had some water melons. 'Show them to me,' said she, and without my touching them, or even approaching them, be sure that I will eat them within forty-eight hours.

He accepted the offer, and showed her the water melons at a distance, and immediately locked them away in a coffer, the key of which he put into his own pocket, not trusting it to any of his people.

The second morning thereafter, the negress asked him where his melons were. He opened the coffer in which he had locked them, and had much pleasure in seeing them quite entire; but the pleasure was shortlived, and soon changed into vast astonishment, for, when he lifted them to show them round, they were empty, nothing remaining but the sheer skin, distended like a bladder and as dry as parchment.

They were obliged to return to land (Africa) to revictual and take in water, there they landed the sorceress and her company; after which the vessel started again and made a fortunate voyage. (Cassacanarie 1895:61-63) emphasis in original

It was thousands of these “fortunate” voyages which brought the captured Africans to the New World. When these “fortunate” voyages which transformed the identity and status of the African arrived at their respective destinations, the captured Africans were simply released from the hold of the ships unto the bigger prison of the plantations. Phillippo aptly describes the scene of transfer, “arrived at the destined port...these poor wretches were sold at public outcry to the highest bidder, - were driven in chains (frequently naked) by their purchasers to their respective domiciles, and the greater part of them doomed to toil almost without rest or intermission, until relieved by death from their captivity and suffering” (1843:155). Within this context, only the Obia Doctor afforded a relief alternative to death.

From Mons Le Compte de Gennes account (and others), it is clear that the more accomplished African spiritualists did not arrive by European slavers; unless they chose to do so in order to help the sick and dying. Umeh explains that Igbo *Obia* practitioners travel by way of mystical propulsion or *Kpakpankpa Agwu*. This confirms one source of the legend of “The Flying Africans” repeated by Blacks throughout the Diaspora. Umeh offers that *Dibia* is

true to his/her *egira Agwu* which in His/Her capacity as *Agwu egbe n’enu onyunyo n’ana* (*Agwu*, Kite up the sky with its shadow on the ground) propelled by *Kpakpankpa Agwu* the mystic propulsion engendered by *Agwu* which guides *Dibia* to wherever his or her services are required. They invariably came back through the same *Agwu’s* safe conduct and propulsion...the *Dibia* herein described as the Kite, whose characteristics he

or she shared with his or her *egira Agwu*, does not get stuck or get lost in his or her professional sojourn to other lands. In other words, like the Kite, which practices seasonal migrations, the Dibia invariably comes back if he or she so desires or is so propelled by *kpakpanka Agwu*. (Umeh 1999b: 28)

The ability of *Dibia* to travel mystically partially explains the so-called magical feats accomplished during rebellions such as disappearing and bullet deflection. Mystical “travellings of *ikwu ekili* or *ikwu eli* or *ide nde* or *ibi ibuo*” did indeed provide invulnerability against the white man. In the following account, Congo Brown who “was one the most learned and highly accomplished professors of Obeah ever known in the West Indies”, like the Senagalese negress proved himself as “powerful an agent as slavery.”

Congo Brown was reported to be one of two brothers. Six months after the brothers arrived in the West Indies, “one of the brothers disappeared, bodily and completely” (Cassacinarie 1895:20). The remaining brother, Congo Brown, “had ‘married a wife,’ [and] accounted for his brother’s disappearance by saying that he had flown away back to Africa, and that he would have done so too, had he not eaten something that prevented his doing so, ‘salt’ (my informants, say).” Brown, was known to perform miraculous feats, one of which is equivalent to Jesus’ “feeding of the five thousand” and will be discussed later. In the account which follows, Brown proved not only that he was “invulnerable to the white man”; but that he was more powerful and capable of inflicting on the slavocracy, the exact same blows they administered to the enslaved.

Congo Brown, having committed some offence, was tied up to be flogged. Brown took the matter very coolly, and told the manager that he had better not flog him in case the flogging hurt the wrong person. However, the flogging proceeded, and about three lashes had been given, at which Brown only laughed, when piercing shrieks were heard from the ‘Great House’ (Manager’s residence) which was close by; upon this the performance was suspended, and it was ascertained that the shrieks were uttered by the Manager’s wife, in the house, *on whose back it appears those three lashes had simultaneously fallen*. Brown got off the rest of that flogging, and it seems

that the Manager's wife who suffered, was in some way the cause of the punishment being administered. (Cassacanarie 1895:20)

With men like Congo Brown on the plantations, the enslaved had some recourse to medicine, and much cause to hope among their despair. In Obia Doctor the enslaved had role models; exemplary men and women who demonstrated their superior powers among the powerless masses; men and women who used their knowledge to heal and protect, men and women who affirmed their humanity, their divinity and their sovereignty. The mystical powers of pan-African Obia was an indispensable resource to the enslaved; mystical propulsion, the mystical deflection and transference of blows and bullets, miraculous feeding, curing of illnesses, the prediction of future events, protection from enemies and numerous other services allowed Africans to survive where others could not. Many *Ndibia* came, some returned home and others put down roots. But the *Ndibia* came, because the millions of Africans who came, came to suffer bitterly.

Stolen from Africa they came. Over, 10.7 million of the 12.5 million who survived the transatlantic journey came (Voyages Database). From Senegambia they came. From Guinea-Bissau they came. From Sierra Leone they came. From the Gold Coast they came. From the Bight of Benin they came. From Niger and Delta Cross they came. From the Bight of Biafra they came. From Congo-Angola they came. The West-Central Africans Came. Mandingo, Fula, Jalof, and Wolof came; Igbo, and Bantu came; Akan - Ga; Akwamu; Akim; the Agona; Obutu; Bono; Gonja; Ashanti; Dagomba and Fanti came. Ewes, Popos, Ouidahs and Jaquins came; Guru, Kono, Mende Bakwe, Bassa, Bete, Dida, Sherbro Bullom, Temme, and Goia came. Dispossessed of their homeland, kin, and humanness, the enslaved Africans came. From 1517 they came into Jamaica as slaves, for some three hundred and fifty years an estimate of over of 1.2 million came (Voyages Database). They came, victims of avarice and capitalism,

enslaved to work, yet more than slaves. The Africans who came West were bearers of ancient spiritual traditions – a gift from the old world to the new.

Among the first Africans to arrive in Jamaica were Igbos and Efiks shipped from the Niger Delta known variously as the Calamale, Calabar, Kalabari and/or Carmahaly Negroes³⁰. It is difficult to determine from the existing records how many Igbos and Efiks arrived in this early period. However, we do know that they asserted a fair measure of cultural dominance because when the British invaded Jamaica in 1655, most of the Negroes belonging to the Spanish –those referred to as the “Carmahaly Negroes”, took the British offence as an opportunity to secure their freedom (Johnston 1910;Patterson 1969; Kopytoff 1973). This Carmahaly exodus was by no means the first willful resettlement by enslaved Africans in Jamaica as even before the British invasion, “negroes who disliked the mild servitude under the Spaniard (who never maltreated his African slaves as he did his Amerindian subjects) were constantly running away and living in the dark forests of the mountain peaks, where they made common cause with the persecuted Arawaks. To those escaped slaves was given the name “Cimarrones” or mountaineers – from *Cima* (a peak) – a term soon shortened into *Marrones* (English, Maroons)” (Johnston 1910:239-240). No doubt, some these newly freed Africans would have joined with the already well organized *Cimarrónes*, while others started new communities which emerged two major groups led by Juan de Serras and Juan de Bolas. These several groups of free Africans became known collectively as the “Carmahaly Negroes” or “rebellious negroes” and they waged war with the British for the next eighty-four years; eventually assimilating to a militaristic Akan culture and becoming the Windward Maroons, so described because of their eventual final settlement in the Windward (north-

eastern) part of the island. As noted before, it is among these Carmahaly Negroes or Maroons that the word *Obia* is first heard by the British in Jamaica (Bilby and Handler 2004).

The term was first recorded in the 1730s in “official correspondence dealing with the Jamaican Maroons and the British military campaigns against them” (Bilby and Handler 2004:178). In 1731, Colonel Campbell who reports on the capture of several rebellious negroes informs his superiors that “the wife of the chief Obra [sic] man promises to shew the town and great cave where they send their women and children to, when any party comes upon them” (Headlam 1938:25). The Maroons remained formidable opponents of the British, who were eventually forced to recognize their sovereignty by the signing of Peace Treaties in 1739/1740. At the signing of the Peace Treaties the Carmahaly Negroes became one band of “the Kings Negroes” called the Windward Maroons (Kopytoff 1973). So impressed were the British with Maroon military intelligence that one important condition of the Peace Treaty was Maroon consent to be the slavocracy’s Black Police force. These “Kings Negroes” were now sworn to defend the island from foreign forces as well as enforce the enslavement of other Africans on the plantations. As will be seen later, it is these treaties which effectively turned Jamaica into an *Obia* factory, creating as it did a most urgent need for *Obia* practitioners among enslaved population. This most urgent need was filled as greater numbers of Africans from the Calabar Coast were forced onto slavers bound for the New World.

The Bight of Biafra or The Bight of *Obia*

The Bight of Biafra or the Niger Delta of the slavery era consisted of five trade ports; Old Calabar, Opobo, Andoni, Bonny and Elem Kalabari which constituted “the Calabar Coast”. The etyma *Obia* is denoted in the designation “Biafra” and in this Bight from which a

high proportion of Africans were shipped there exists numerous other medico-spiritual cognates of *Obia*. In fact, a great number of the Africans brought from the Biafra were sold through the *Ibiniukpabi* oracle of the Aros. The Aro, an Igbo sub-ethnicity founded the town Aro Chukwu circa 1610 and created a trade diaspora which came to dominate trading in the hinterland. These *umuchukwu* – “god men” or “god boys” as they called themselves controlled their own trade from Aro nde Izuogu in the hinterland, spreading their axes southwest to Elem Kalabari and southeast to Old Calabar (Nwokeji 2009). The *umuchukwu* with their *Ndibias* (medicine men) controlled their trade diaspora with the help of an oracle known as *Ibiniukpabi* oracle by which they managed to increase their power and eventual came to the supply greatest amount of Africans (an estimated 70%) exported from the Bight of Biafra (Nwokeji 2009).

From the internal trade on the Bight of Biafra with major points at Aro nde Izuogu, Old Calabar and Elem Kalabari hundreds of thousands of Africans shipped abroad in the larger transatlantic triangular trade became known variously as the Karmlahals, Carmahaly, Calamale, *Carabalí*, Calabali, Calabari, Los Vennejales, Los Varmahaly, Los Vermaxales and Los Vermahalles. There is some confusion over these various terms used to designate Africans shipped from the eastern Niger Delta. This confusion arises from the fact that the Efik trade area on a tributary of the Cross River came to be called Old Calabar although unrelated to Elem Kalabari to the West. Elem Kalabari then became known as New Calabar, (even though it was actually the first trade port) to differentiate it from the Old Calabar in the Cross River region. The Calabar Coast then came to reference the area from New Calabar to Old Calabar. Africans shipped from the Kalabari/Calabar Coast came to comprise an estimated 14.6% of the

total volume of the European slave trade or some or 1.7 of 11.6 million between 1470 and 1860 (Chambers 1993, 2002).

The Bight of Biafra also supplied the largest numbers of females (women and girls) to the New World. Between 1651 and 1725 Biafran women comprised an average 44%, and Biafran girls 6% of the total volume of females exported from the West-Central African coast; while for the period 1751 to 1850 women averaged 25% and girls 15% (Nwokeji 2009). In the early period, (about 1450s - 1650) when Elem Kalabari was the main port of trade, Ijo peoples comprised the majority of exports along with “Delta Edo, Ogoni, Andony and Ibibio” (Chambers 1993), but from the middle of the seventeenth century these groups were superseded by Igbo ethnicities. The shift in exportation of coastal ethnicities to hinterland peoples coincided with the increase in slave trading from Old Calabar. During the course of the over 400 years of the slave trade major trading shifted from Elem Kalabari (1450s – 1699) to Old Calabar (1700- 1740s) and finally from Old Calabar to Bonny between 1725 -1750. Accordingly, from the 1750s to the end of the slave trade Bonny was the principal port for export of Igbos (Nwokeji 2009).

Of the five trading ports which comprised the Calabar Coast, the three most prominent were Elem Kalabari, Bonny and Old Calabar. However, although “the slaves sold at the ports of the eastern Niger Delta came predominantly from the Igbo country” (Alagoa 1972:127), Igbo slaves were also shipped from various locations in the Western Delta as “Nembe (Brass) also received slaves from beyond Igbo country down the Niger, Western Delta, [and] some western Igbo passed through Itsekiri middlemen, as well as Urhobo, Isoko and other groups from the regions under Benin influence” (ibid). At Old Calabar in the Eastern Delta, the Efik, a lineage of the Ibibio distinguished themselves as coldblooded

capitalists. *Obio Oko* (Creek Town) the first town founded by Efik circa 1540 (Behrendt and Graham 2003) became the principal settlement of Efik slave traders during the 17th century when the English began to dominate the trade (Lovejoy and Richardson 1999). The Efik were notoriously ruthless traders and for this reason the word “Efik” which means “to oppress” was given to these mercenary Ibibios by their neighbors. Additionally, these Efik oppressors called both themselves and the “Calabar” river *Iboku* - “those who quarrel with the Ibo” (Chambers 2002:106). These oppressors who eventually instituted a brutal plantation slave system of their own came to reference “slave work” as “Ibo work” (Morrill 1963). These “monopolistic middlemen” who used human pawns or *ubion*, also differed from other traders in Niger Delta in their total control of Old Calabar, charging high “comeys” and refusing Europeans the right to spend even one night ashore until the mid-1800s (Morrill 1963). As such, between the Efik *Iboku* of Old Calabar and the Aro *umuchukwu* hundreds of thousands Igbos were shipped across the Atlantic.

The export of Biafran Africans to Jamaica may be conveniently divided into two periods:³¹ 1. the Spanish period of occupation - 1510 – 1655 controlled by Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch traders, and 2. the English period of plantation slavery - 1656-1834 during which the British gained a virtual monopoly in the Bight. The estimates of exports from the Niger Delta for the two periods are 42,000 and 856,586 respectively. When the British captured the island in 1655, a total of 1200 to 1400 Africans were said to be on the island, along with the same amount of whites, some creoles and a little over 70 Tainos (Campbell 1977:394). This figure was an increase over figures offered for the year 1611, when it was reported that there was a total of 665 blacks, 107 being free and 558 enslaved.

Compared to the English period, Spanish Jamaica had a comparatively minute number of African slaves. The Spanish had voyaged to Jamaica in search of gold, and having found none, many of them deserted the island. The few who remained reluctantly engaged themselves in ranching and agriculture. The Spanish crown retained scant interest in the island, and as such, it “remained little more than a strategic outpost of the Spanish Empire – an island which was not allowed to fall into the hands of the Spain’s enemies, but a possession whose value was debased by the absence of precious metal” (Bryan 1992:26). Although few in number, the Africans who were brought into Jamaica after the rapid loss of the indigenous population to disease and maltreatment; were indispensable to the Spanish economy. Freed blacks (*horros*) and mulattoes served as armed forces in the cavalry and militia, while enslaved Africans performed a multiplicity of tasks including construction, sugar manufacturing, forest clearing and leather tanning (Bryan 1992:25). In 1655, Oliver Cromwell’s 9,000 men who captured the island found it underdeveloped with “not one hundredth part of the plantable land...in cultivation” (Campbell 1977:393). The British also found it to be underpopulated for their purposes, and embarked on the massive importation of enslaved Africans into Jamaica.

The first British ship visited Old Calabar in 1644, to supply plantation labor for Barbados (Behrendt and Graham 2003) and the first enslaved Africans brought to Jamaica by the English came directly from Barbados (Handler and Bilby 2001). Over the course of the next 152 years (1655-1807) all the Africans who came to Jamaica were brought in British slavers and among these were Biafran Africans an estimated 354,280 in number of a total of 856,586 (Voyages Database). Between the period 1718-1814, Igbos are estimated to have comprised some 61% of the total number of Biafran Africans imported into Jamaica; while

from 1662 to 1860, some 1.26 million Igbos of a total of 1.66 Biafran Africans were exported to the New World (Chambers 2002:112). Accordingly, Igbos are estimated to have contributed 76% of all Africans shipped from the Niger Delta and some 32% (the highest percentage) of the total volume of the British trade. An etymological scrutiny of JamAfrican religions shows dominance of three major cultural groups, namely; Efik/Igbo, Akan and BaKongo. As the following figures show, enslaved Africans from the Bight of Biafra constituted the greatest number of Africans imported into the island during British period. Africans from the Gold Coast numbered 337,127 with West Central Africa supplying an estimated 201,358.

Period	JamAfrican <i>makuku matatu</i> ³²		
	Bight of Biafra	Gold Coast	West Central Africa
1661-1675	9,489	913	726
1676-1700	21,802	9,592	24,055
1701-1725	2,819	71,310	20,993
1726-1750	63,407	71,340	58,322
1751-1775	85,551	82,986	24,604
1776-1800	134,413	85,510	56,886
1801-1808	36,799	15,476	15,772
Totals	354,280	337,127	201,358

Source: *Voyages Database*

In his exploration of *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra*, Ugo Nwokeji (2009) offers that in the early British period (1659 – 1699) West Central Africa or Kongo, supplied the most slaves, some 11, 433 to Bight of Biafra’s 6,428 and 3,104 from the Gold Coast. However, as the above table shows, one hundred years later (by 1800), the Bight of Biafra dominated in the slave trade supplying 134,413 slaves compared to 85,510 from the Gold Coast and some 56,886 for West Central Africa. Over the period of 140 years, West Central Africa moved from

being the most profitable to least lucrative of the three slaving areas. Enslaved Africans from the Calabar Coast were favored by the Spanish and who came to be the numerically dominant ethnicity in Jamaica (and the New World), may be cast as the invisible force which provided the foundation and direction for JamAfrican religion.

Of the three culture areas which supplied the greatest number of Africans to Jamaica, it is the Bight of Biafra which contains the greatest number of “bi” morphs evidencing its salience among the Niger Delta ethnicities. The following selected thirty phrases related to the cognition and spirituality demonstrates the prevalence of the concept in the Biafra. In addition to these selected phrases, there are numerous towns and personal names bearing the “bi” cognate. Of particular note, are the terms *Abia*; *Abia ibok*; *Abiaidiöñ* and *Mbiam* which are of Ibibio and Efik origin (Simmonds 1965:223, 226; Malcolm 1922:220) and the Ijaw/Nembe cognate *Obi* as referencing “sickness or disease” (Allsop 1996:412). Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby writing “On the Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah’ in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean” theorize that “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” (2001:97). The Ibibio and Efik cognates show clearly that there is some regional and dialectal differences in pronunciation along the Kalabari Coast. Further, the designation of *Obi* as sickness or disease in the upper delta suggest that there are also slight nuances in meaning which assign the same word for both the ailment or cause and the cure. All of these nuances of morphology and phonology played an important part in the unfolding drama of West Indian *Obia*.

25 NIGER DELTA "OBIA" COGNATES		
1	<i>Obia or Mbia Ogwu</i>	Expatriate <i>Ndibia</i>
2	<i>Obia</i>	Doctor
3	<i>Obi a</i>	This (particular) Mind; Will
4	<i>Chukwu Abiama</i>	The Wisdom and Knowledge that reveals himself
5	<i>Ndibia</i>	Experts in Knowledge and Wisdom
6	<i>Abia / Abia ibok</i>	Adept; Practitioner; Herbalist / Expert of Magic Medicine
7	<i>Abiaidiöñ</i>	Wizard
8	<i>Aka Obi</i>	Mind of God
9	<i>Obi Ofu</i>	Open Unbiased Relaxed Mind
10	<i>Obi Chukwu</i>	House of God
11	<i>Ize Obi</i>	Ancient Divine King of Igboland
12	<i>Obi</i>	Chief; King
13	<i>Obi</i>	Heart
14	<i>Obi</i>	Chest; Upper Half of Body
15	<i>Obi</i>	Temper or Disposition
16	<i>Obi Ebere</i>	Mercy; Gentleness of Heart
17	<i>Obi Ama</i>	Communal Village Hall
18	<i>Obi/Obu/Iba/Obama</i>	Sacred building
19	<i>Obi</i>	Sickness; Disease
20	<i>Mbiam</i>	Magical Liquid
21	<i>Obire</i>	Charm
22	<i>Obi Ugbo</i>	Vessel Homestead; Vessel Residence
23	<i>Obi Mbu</i>	First <i>Obi</i>
24	<i>Nneobi</i>	Mother of All <i>Obis</i>
25	<i>Obi Igbo</i>	Heart of Igbo

The widespread acceptance and use of the term *Obia* among African Jamaicans (and other English-speaking territories), points not only to a common belief in spiritual power, but also to a high degree of linguistic convergence in the languaging of Spirit in West-Central Africa. As Warner-Lewis argues, “these possibilities point to the commonality of the morph - *bi*- across several West African languages bearing meanings such as ‘knowledge’, ‘wisdom’, ‘spiritual power’, [and] ‘herbal skill’”³³ (2003:352). Other etyma include Twi *Obeye* – neutral spiritual power and *Obayifo* – witch doctor as well as *abia* “a creeper used in making

charms”. The Akan term *abayide* meaning sorcerer is also suggested along with Awutu *Obire* or charm, and Edo *Obi* – poison. Kumina ceremonies in honor of the Kongolese *Nzambi* – God or “The Great Spirit” also constitute cooperative behavior in terms of a duty to the *jumbi* – ancestral spirits who provide *mbiya* – charm/medicine (Warner-Lewis 2003). Additionally, one term for the concept of evil in Kikongo is *(o)b-bi* (Holm and Shilling 1982: 145), and for Kumina practitioners, the Congolese term “*sala bilongo*” means “working Obia”. From this etymological evidence, we can therefore say with certainty that as Johnson had indicated in 1910, the word Obia “Obia (misspelt Obeah) seems to be a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the Niger Delta, which simply means ‘Doctor’” (Johnston 1910:253). This etymological evidence is further corroborated by John U. Umeh who affirms that “the Igbo *Dibia* [Holistic Doctor] established in the Caribbeans [sic] (and America) as *Obia* man (spelt “obeah” by the English)...When an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* [Doctor] profession in another land or society” (Umeh 1999b: 28). It stands to reason therefore that with the Bight of Biafra supplying over 70% of enslaved Africans to the New World, that the British on observing early Obia practice in the West Indies would find that “No Negro...can do anything of this [*Obia*], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros.” We can therefore confirm Handler and Bilby’s suggestion 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)” (ibid). In the making of West Indian Obia, “Obeah Negroes”, “physicians and conjurers”, or “Obeah Doctors” were chiefly the Calamale or Kamarhalay Igbos.

The Karmahalays of Jamaica

The Karmahalays of Jamaica or Jamaica's Kalabari Negroes appear to have become culturally dominant during the period of Spanish rule (1510 to 1655) before the British invasion (1655) and eventual conquest in 1670. During the Spanish occupation an estimated 42,000 Biafran Africans were exported to the New World, mainly from Elem Kalabari (Nwokeji 2009). During this period, Africans from the Bight were highly favored by the Spanish who sought to import as many as possible into their colonies. Accordingly, in 1627 "Spanish missionary priest Alonso de Sandoval reported that Caravallies, as Biafran captives were then called, were 'innumerable' in Spanish America and spoke a variety of tongues" (Nwokeji 2009:242). As noted earlier, various ethnicities including Ijo, Ibibio/Efik and Igbo comprised the human cargo from the Calabar Coast in this early period. According to Nwokeji

while captives from the [Biafra] region did not make premium grade in the eyes of planters, there seemed always to be pockets of plantation Americas that desired them, a phenomenon which grew, rather than diminished, over time. In early seventeenth century Spanish America, Igbo captives "were considered tractable and hence were highly sought after by some of the slaveholders in the Americas." (40)

Even during the later period of the 1740s when there was a major boom in British slave trade, Biafran slaves though being considered more sickly and suicidal, still maintained a high profile among British traders and slavers; and "one Theodore Morris...in Barbados bemoaned to Bristol merchant Isaac Hobbhouse in January 1730 or 1731 that 'there has not been a cargo of Ebbo Slaves sould here a long time, and many People are Enquiring for them'" (40).

Europeans generally considered the Igbo as "good colonists" who adapt themselves to adverse conditions in a quiet, unobstructive and effective manner (Umeh 1999a: 4). The Igbo slave Olaudah Equiano may have been inflating the notion of Igbo toughness when he wrote that "West India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part

of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity and zeal” (Equiano 1967:39). He was true however about popular opinion regarding other features of Igbo character, for according to Crow, a British trader, the Eboes constituted a “superior race”, were “fair dealing people”, “generally honest” and

of a more mild and engaging disposition than the other tribes... and though much less suited for the severe manual labor of the field, they are preferred in the West India colonies for their fidelity and utility, as domestic servants, particularly if taken young, as they become the most industrious of any of the tribes taken to the colonies. (Nwokeji 2009:41)

The utilization of Igbos as domestic servants, coupled with the fact that the Biafran Coast supplied the greatest majority of African women to the New World may if duly considered, provide more insight into the status of Obia as both nomenclature and practice. The Igbos then who came to represent over 70% of Africans brought to the New World as cargo, were in high demand by the Spanish and from early on became the culturally dominant ethnicity among slaves known as the Karmahaly Negroes.

Upon the British invasion of the island in 1655, the runaway Negroes formed three main groups of which the most rebellious became known as the Karmahalys. One group was led by Lubolo (Juan de Bolas), the Karmahalys was led by Juan de Serras and of the third group - the Moko group very little is known (Campbell 1977). Almost immediately, these groups known as “the rebellious slaves” were to emerge as more fearsome fighters than the Spaniards, becoming “thorns and pricks” in the sides of British. So formidable were the runaway negroes that five years before the Spaniards conceded the island to the British, War was declared against the Carmahaly Negroes. According to Campbell, “the Article of War, drawn up by the Governor, Sir Thomas Modyford, and Council August 15, 1665, occasioned by ‘the Rebellion of the Carmahaly Negroes and other Outlying Negroes,’... is the first formal

declaration of war against any maroon group in Jamaica, just ten years after the British conquest” (1977:403). This formal document comprising of three pages and ten clauses, used the first resolution to describe the rebellious activities of the Carmahalys.

Whereas the Rebellious Negroes, commonly called ye Karmahalys, do dayly under notion of freindshipp and fair Correspondence beguile many Hunters and commit divers Murders, and outrageous [sic] upon them and others, which Negroes for their number and Condition are so contemptable [sic] and base that no way for the persecution of such perfidious villaines can be ill accounted of, and whereas the Assembly now in being did pass an Act for their Suppression and that the Monyes... should be levyed on the Country by an equal Tax for the encouragement thereof, all the Inhabitants of this Island to surprise and kill those sneaking and treacherous Rogues. (Campbell 1977: 403)

By this 1665 written declaration of war against the “Carmahaly Negroes and other Outlying Negroes”, Africans from the Bight of Biafra became distinguished as one of the earliest and most successful freedom fighters. The Carmahaly Negroes, after eliminating their major threat, the Lubolo group, eventually made their way to the north east end of the island and became known as the Windward Maroons. The other ethnic group emerging as an early leaders are the Kongo “Angola” Africans who on two occasions sought to negotiate terms of surrender to the British.

The lexical identity of three major maroon groups clue us to the fact that these groups were led (if not wholly constituted) by Biafran and Kongo Africans. *Lubolo* and *Moko* are central African terms and as already indicated, Karmahaly referenced Africans from the Bight of Biafra. In presenting a treatise on *Central Africans in the Caribbean*, Warner-Lewis (2003:12) notes (as affirmed by the foregoing chart), that the final decades of slave trade was characterized by increased importation of slaves from the region of the Congo and Angola. She offers further, that Congo-Angolans, “were some of the earliest slaves to be landed in Jamaica” as proved by the fact that “in 1598 while the island was under Spanish control,

[there] were 155 Angolans” (12). These “Angolans” were distinguished by two fatal attempts to negotiate terms of surrender. First, “in the sequel to the British seizure of Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, an Angolan attempting to negotiate terms of capitulation on behalf of the deposed Spanish govern, Juan Ramirez de Arellano, was strangled by guerrilla forces of a Spanish faction opposed to surrender” (Warner Lewis 2003:69). Secondly, the name the African called Lubolo or Juan “de Bolas” who formed the first group of maroons “is no doubt a reinterpretation of the etymon Libolo, an Mbundu sub-group” (69). Lubolo who surrendered to the British around 1660 on the terms that he subjugate other rebel groups was “cut to pieces” by Juan de Serras’ group.

This first encounter between these two African leaders was to become representative of Maroon and Plantation slave relations as the British made the enslavement of other Africans a condition of Maroon “freedom”. From early on, the fierceness with which Africans would pursue and murder each for the sake of freedom was eloquently penned by the British. According to one 1660 report the British colonizers delighted in the fact that “the enemy in our bowels, to whom our lives have been a prey, and many men have been subjected to their mercy (I mean the Negroes) are now become our bloodhounds...and they are in our behalf more violent and fierce against their fellows than we can possibly be” (Campbell 1977: 399). With the elimination of Lubolo by Juan de Serras, many small Maroon communities sprung up in the general area of Clarendon. No doubt some from Lubolo’s group joined in with the Moko group, even as others over the course of the years went onto form communities such as Congo Town in St. Elizabeth (Warner Lewis 2003; Campbell 1977). Juan de Serras used his superior negotiating skills to move east, and during the next thirty years remained generally obscure, even as the first major rebellion of Akan slaves (1690) on

the Sutton's plantation led to formation of the group known as the Leeward Maroons (Patterson 1967).

In 1731 when the word "*Obia*" was first literized by the British, there were two major communities – The Windward Maroons and the Leeward Maroons, and both were being led by Akan Negroes, Cudjoe (Leeward Maroons) and Nanny (Windward Maroons). The Windward group, originally the Karmahalys was the most diverse of the two and suffered from leadership problems because of this, while Cudjoe ruled his predominantly Akan community without fear or restriction (Kopytoff 1973). Windward Maroon origin myths recalls the signing of the 1739 treaty as the beginning of the Maroon nation, itself said to be comprised of four founding African nations, known variably as "Papa (also Prapa, or prapra), Mandinga, Ibo and Mongala (also pronounced Mongola, or Mangola). Other names, however, such as Dokose, Timbambu, or Nago, sometimes appear among the primary four instead of the more common names" (Bilby 2005:80). These names reference various ethnicities from West Central Africa. The Ibo, Yoruba and Nago are Niger Delta ethnic groups; Timbambu, Mongala are Congolese and the Papa are located in Benin/Togo. The Mande (Mandinga) are found in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Gambia. These diverse groups of Africans who joined together in a relentless fight for freedom provided for the organic development of a pan-African *Obia* on Jamaican soil.

Most scholars consent to Jamaica as the place of origin for the term *Obia* because the "earliest acceptance of the word *obeah* in the English dictionaries must be traced to a Jamaican origin" (Williams 1934:58). Williams also argues that the deportation of Jamaican *Obia* practitioners to other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean was also instrumental in the dissemination of the term (and practice). While it is true that the advent of the word *Obia* in

English dictionaries can be traced to Jamaica, this itself does not provide a reasonable case for Jamaica as the West Indian site of origin. Critiquing the widespread belief that the term *Obia* originated in Jamaica, Bilby and Handler suggest Barbados as a more probable site of origin based on the 1710 evidence. However, it must be noted that these “Calamale Negros” of Barbados, were the same Igbo/Igbo-speaking Africans variously referred to as Calamale, Calabar, Kalabari and/or Carmahaly in Jamaica. Two of the earliest British colonies, Barbados and Jamaica both imported Africans from Calabar beginning in the 17th century. However, the presence of Kalabari Igbos in Jamaica long before the arrival of the British suggests that the etymon *Obia* had been in use in Jamaica since the early 16th century when the first African slaves were imported into the Caribbean by the Spanish. The Igbo/Efik etymology suggests that a two hundred and twelve year oral *Obia* culture preceded the literization of the term in British manuscripts of the early eighteenth century, and its subsequent demonization thirty years later. In the case of Jamaica then, Maroon oral history, British historical records and etymological evidence from Nigeria confirms that *Obia* is an Akan popularized, Kongo synthesized, Igbo/Efik term.

For JamAfricans, the term *Obia* signaled divine healing, herbalism, spiritual intelligence and expertise, neutral mystical power, as well as spiritual weaponry. Throughout history, terms used to describe *Obia* practitioners in Jamaica include “Obeahs”, “Obeah doctors”, “Four-eyed man”, “Spiritual”, “Bush Doctor”, “Obeah Professors”, “Black Doctors”, “Seers”, “Monkey Man”, “Black Heart Man” “Spiritual Surgeon”, “God-man”, “Spiritual Doctor” and “Do Good Man.” In this rendering of history, we can begin to see *Obia* as denoting a holistic medical profession concerned with healing and liberation. With the suffering and death of hundreds of thousands of West Central Africans, the Biafran *Ndibia*

travelled to Jamaica and other parts of the New World, with the aim of using their holistic occult knowledge to alleviate the anguish and horror experienced by their enslaved brothers and sisters. The slavocracy's resistance to these holistic healers unleashed a season of spiritual terror from which Jamaica is yet to recover. Within the hostile environment of brutal enslavement, liberation was healing and Obia became the medicine of war.

Medico-Political Dimensions: Obia as Weaponry

In his *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, David Geggus argues that “one should be wary of projecting back into the colonial period the idea that vodou necessarily expressed a revolutionary ideology” (2002:90). He states further that “it is thus moot whether religious organization facilitated political cooperation or political cooperation fostered religious syncretism” (ibid). While recent scholarship on Haitian history makes dubious the traditional claims of the instructive role of religion in the Haitian revolution, in the case of Jamaica, we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that political action and religious practice was one and the same. Obia Soteriology was expressed in terms of “invulnerability against the White man” and Jamaican slave society distinguished itself by a relentless unleashing of “spiritual terror” as both the slavocracy and the enslaved sought “to elevate their authority by connecting it to the transcendent...attach[ing] worldly power to otherworldly concerns” (Brown 2003:25).

The “spiritual terror” which characterized Jamaican society was produced by the harsh treatment meted out those enslaved Africans who managed to survive both the middle passage and seasoning. “Almoft half of the new imported Negroes die in the Seafoning” says Leslie (1740:312) who had the occasion to visit Jamaica in 1740 at the height of the British trade from the Bight of Biafra. Leslie's first hand observation of the treatment

of slaves forced him to admit that “I incline to touch the Hardhips, which these poor Creatures suffer, in the tenderest manner, from a particular Regard which I owe to many of their Masters; but I can’t conceal their sad Circumstances entirely” (40). Unable to entirely conceal the negro’s “sad circumstance,” Leslie was given cause to state that

They [the British] have indeed the severest ways of punishing. No Country exceeds them in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods by which they put them to death: A Rebellious Negro, or he that twice strikes a white Man, is condemned to the Flames; he is carried to the Place of Execution, and chained flat on his Belly, his Arms and Legs extended; then Fire is set to his Feet, and so he is burnt gradually up: Others they starve to Death, with a Loaf hanging before their Mouths: I have seen these unfortunate Wretches gnaw the Flesh off their own Shoulders, and expire in all the frightful Agonies of one under the most horrid Tortures. (39-40)

These “frightful agonies” leave no doubt that Africans were desperately in need of *Ndibia*. Not only were enslaved Africans burnt alive and starved, but among other horrors they were also brutally whipped at the least offense. Leslie’s eye witness account continues:

The most trivial Error is punished with a terrible Whipping. I have seen some of them treated in that cruel manner, for no other Reason, but to satisfy the brutish Pleasure of an Overseer, who had their Punishment mostly at his Direction. I have seen their Bodies all in a Gore of Blood, the Skin torn off their Backs with the cruel Whip; beaten Pepper, and Salt, rubbed in the Wounds, and a large Stick of Sealing-wax dropped leisurely upon them. It is no wonder, if the horrid Pain of such in-human Tortures incline them to rebel. (304)

The horrid pain of inhuman tortures did cause the enslaved to rebel. Many ran away from the “severe usage,” but if caught they were mutilated. *Petit marronage* and rebellions only served to produce even more extreme brutalities. Others, “to escape the miseries of slavery” committed suicide, but even this option was criminalized. Notwithstanding this, “suicide was awfully prevalent” and to “counteract its influence the legislature enacted a law that every one guilty of it should be hung in chains on the public roads till devoured by birds of prey” (Phillippo 1843: 253). Accordingly, no consideration was given for a people who were

dehumanized in life and in desecrated in death. Every possible means of escape or relief from degradation and dehumanization was criminalized; and even acquiescence to being a “good slave” was folly, for it only served to incur more “severe usage”.

This vicious cycle was demonstrated by the fact that negroes “were subject to punishment at all times, which was inflicted by various legalized instruments of torture, by the common stocks, the thumb screw, the field stocks, the iron collar, the yoke, the block and tackle and the cart-whip” (Phillippo 1843:157). Thus the criminalization of the enslaved’s right to religion was paralleled by the legalization of their inhumane treatment.

If any event transpired which could be construed into an insurrection, these poor creatures were shot like wild beasts, or hunted down with blood hounds; if they made the least resistance they were hewn to pieces; if taken, were doomed to banishment or hopeless imprisonment in chains. If actually concerned in treasonable practices, they were condemned without trial, and expiated their crimes by sufferings inflicted with *a wantonness of cruelty never exceeded by the most degraded barbarians.* (ibid)

While however their oppressors, as caprice or passion dictated, could thus inflict upon their wretched vassals sufferings almost beyond endurance, a slave who raised his hand by nature’s instinct for his own protection, or struck, or dared to strike, or used any violence towards, or *compassed or imagined, the death of a master or mistress* was doomed to suffer death without benefit of clergy. (ibid) emphasis mine

The enslaved’s response to this “wantonness of cruelty” which caused them to be “shot like wild beasts”, “hewn to pieces” and/or “hopelessly imprisoned”; and which denied instinctive response for their own protective was rebellion. Large scale rebellion was one form of resistance. Other forms included petit marronage, suicide, infanticide, poisonings, abortions, self-mutilation, and feigned illness. Revolt and resistance was therefore the most effective means of reclaiming self-ownership; and the use of *Obia* in this regard was an insistence that Africans were *Obi* –somebody; that they had *Obi* – a heart; that they were human—willful

thinking persons who “define their freedom from the idea of ownership and self-ownership” (Okere 1996a:152).

The formative periods in Jamaica’s African religious history, were characterized by *marronage*, numerous rebellions, uprisings and marches. Indeed, *Obia* was the “medicine of war”, ensuring that “with the possible exception of Brazil, no other slave society in the New World experienced such continuous and intense servile revolts” (Patterson 1969:273). When compared to the average American revolts, the scale of the average Jamaican rebellions was much greater. According to Patterson “the average number of slaves in the Jamaica revolts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was approximately four hundred, and the three most serious revolts – the first Maroon War; the 1760 [Tacky] rebellion and the 1832 rebellion – each involved over a thousand slaves” (274). From 1518 to 1655, Africans enslaved by the Spanish, liberated themselves to the mountains of freedom and formed early *cimarrón* “mountain top” communities. Between 1655 and 1768 there were many rebellions, the most noted being the 1673 revolt of Coromantin slaves which created the band of Leeward Maroons. The first Maroon War from 1725 to 1740, the 1690 Revolt on Sutton’s plantation and the famous Tacky Rebellion of 1760 all occurred during this period. From 1769 – 1784, there were six major conspiracies, three of which were executed; while for the period 1784 – 1841 there were seven major conspiracies with four being executed including the largest ever, the 1831 Baptist War. The 1831/32 Rebellion was the last major rebellion of the pre-emancipation period. Dubbed The Baptist War, this rebellion was led by Sam Sharpe a Spirit Baptist *Obi*aman, and involved over 20,000 persons. Thirty-four years later, in 1865, the Morant Bay Rebellion would again involve *Obia* practitioners. In this case, the primary one was Paul Bogle. The 1921 Bedward March remains the most noted religious revolt of the twentieth

century;³⁴ and this was followed by various confrontations between Rastafari and the colonial authorities between 1933 and 1962.

Rastafari gave revolutionary impulse to the island-wide 1938 Labour Uprising. While not generally seen as a religious revolt, the 1938 Uprising was fuelled by the anti-colonial and anti-downpression posture of Howell, the first Rasta and a Science *Obi*aman. Howell preached against the injustices in the society, declaring “death to all black and white wicked” and proclaiming God to be a black man and urging downpressed “Black people [to] rise and shine for the light has come” (Howell 2001: 20). The Serge Island plantation where the labor strike began was “right in the middle of Howell’s preaching territory” and within five weeks of the labor unrest, which swept through Jamaica in a manner reminiscent of the 1760 Tacky Rebellion, Howell was incarcerated in the Bellevue Hospital (Lee 2003:117). From the Africans through to the first Rasta, the spirit of *Obia* has provided revolutionary zeal for JamAfricans seeking “invulnerability against the white man.” Accordingly, it is understandable that European writers, have therefore tended to focus on *Obia* as weaponry.

A rereading of *Obia* historic moment of literization, criminalization and association with rebellion, emphasizes *Obia* positive role within the enslaved community. It shows that “working *Obia*” is a work of unity, of creation, of liberation; and additionally, the work of the redemption and preservation. The 1760 Tacky Rebellion bears testament to the cumulative effects of over two hundred years of *Obia* working in Jamaica, both as a tool of liberation, and also as a religious composite organized around health and security. Accordingly, it is an avenue to the redemption and preservation of the “I”. What the enslaved saw as liberating medicine, the slavocracy experienced as “a terrible menace...gathering force and threatening to obliterate the civilization and the morality of the island” (Williams 1932:118).

This “black thread of mischief” which was at first treated with “scornful mirth” and ignored as “absurd superstition,” became a “terrible menace” whose potency is immortalized in the legendary Tacky Rebellion and the exploits of Three-Finger Jack.³⁵

The chronicling of Tacky’s Rebellion is not only important for revealing the ongoing warfare and spiritual terror which characterized Jamaican society, but also for providing insight into the spiritual battles fought between the plantation slaves and their adversaries, the Maroons; proving the effectiveness of the British strategy of “divide and conquer”. Noting that there was “scarcely a single parish, to which this conspiracy of the Coromantins did not extend,” the planter Edward Long, in his *History of Jamaica*, gives us the first-hand detailed accounts of *Obia* and *Myal*, and reports on the ending of the rebellion:

In St. Mary's parish a check was fortunately given at one estate, by surprizing a famous Obeah man or priest, much respected among his countrymen. He was an old Coromantin, who, with others, of his profession, had been a chief in counseling and instigating the credulous herd, to whom these priests administered a powder, which, being rubbed on their bodies, was to make them invulnerable: they persuaded them into a belief that Tacky, their generalissimo in the woods, could not possibly be hurt by the white men, for that he caught all the bullets fired at him in his hand, and hurled them back with destruction at his foes. This old imposter was caught whilst he was tricked up with all his feathers, teeth and other implements of magic, and in this attire suffered military execution by hanging: many of his disciples, when they found that he was so easily put to death, notwithstanding all the boasted feats of his powder and incantations, soon altered their opinion of him, and determined not to join their countrymen, in a cause which hither to had been unattended with success. But the fame of general Tacky, and the notion of his invulnerability, still prevailed over the minds of others, as *that hero had escaped hitherto in every conflict without a wound.* (Long 1774: 451-452) emphasis mine

From this we learn that the revolt was planned, instigated and executed by a Priestly Assembly of *Obia* men. The “famous Obeah man” and “others of his profession” served as military oracles, counselors and medics administering the “powder of invulnerability.” The first major blow to the rebels was therefore the elimination of a major Military Priest Advisor

who provided spiritual weaponry to the rebel soldiers. This Obia Priest was surprised and eliminated no doubt with the help of Maroon Obia; but Long makes it clear that the medicine had worked. General Tacky “caught all the bullets fired at him and hurled them back with destruction at his foes,” making himself into a hero who up to that time had escaped “every conflict without a wound.” Similarly, legend boasts that Nanny of the Windward Maroons used her “batty [buttocks] bounce bullet back pon man.”³⁶

Both the Maroons and the plantations had with their community the secret science that enabled their warriors to “bounce bullet back pon man,” but eventually, it was the Maroons, the group of Africans with freedom to practice Obia who won the war for the British.

The rebels in St. Mary’s, under general Tacky, still maintained their ground...The rebels now thought only of concealing themselves, and made choice of a little glade, or cockpit, so environed with rocky steeps, that it was difficult to come at them; but in this situation, a party of militia and *Marons*, with some sailors, assaulted them with hand grenades, killed some, and took a few prisoners. Soon after this they suffered a more decisive overthrow; the *Marons* of Scot’s-Hall, having got fight in their main body, forced them to an engagement; the rebels soon gave way, and Tacky, their leader, having separated himself from the rest, was closely pursued by lieut. Davy of the *Marons*, who fired at him whilst they were both running at full speed, and shot him dead. His head was brought to Spanish town, and stuck on a pole in the highway; but, not long after, stolen, as was supposed by some of his countrymen, who were unwilling to let it remain exposed in so ignominious a manner. (Long 1774:457)

The Rebellion therefore ended with a show-down between the Scot’s-Hall Maroons and Tacky’s soldiers. Two Negro generals, Maroon Davy and Coromantin Tacky engaged each other, with Davy gaining the upper-hand, and shooting Tacky dead “while they were both running at full speed.” The remaining rebels committed suicide. And according to Long, “thus terminated this rebellion; which whether we consider the extent and secrecy of its plan, the multitude of the conspirators, and the difficulty of opposing its eruptions in such a

variety of different places at once, will appear to have been more formidable than any hitherto known in the West Indies” (Long 1774: 461).

Tacky’s attempt at an islandwide insurrection could only be curbed by fighting Obia with Obia. This most formidable rebellion proved that Obia was as powerful an agent of liberation, as capitalism was an agent of slavery. Contrary to the popular discourse, the slavocracy was up against very real powers, it is so that almost immediately “a universal cry of execration went up against magic, the mere name became a crime, and common hatred...was formulated” (Levi 1910: 4). This “universal cry of execration” which turned enslaved Obia practitioners into criminals also forced them into an inevitable and aggressive pan-Africanism, as not long after the planter Long was extremely distressed that

some of these execrable wretches in Jamaica [Obiamen] introduced what they called the *myal dance*, and established a kind of society, into which they invited all they could. The lure hung out was, that every Negroe, initiated into the myal society, would be invulnerable by the white men. (Long 1774: 416-417)

And since we know that “there was scarcely an estate which did not contain a priest or priestess of this deadly art [Obia], nor did there appear to be a single negro whose mind was not more or less under its influence” (Phillippo 1843:249), we come to understand how *Obia* as “powerful healing” for the JamAfricans became the “unclean thing” for the British. We understand also the ambivalence of the British, who on being threatened by this spiritual power, came to denounce it as impostorship, even as they employed their own understandings of the sacred to perpetrate barbaric and vicious forms of cognitive terrorism. To assist them in this endeavor, they had at their disposal the Maroons, who, having signed away their freedom, were Treaty to spiritual terror. These Maroons, holders of the secret

science of the different groups which comprised their communities, could succeed magnificently where their colonizers failed.

The defeat of Tacky at the hands of the Maroons confirmed the usefulness of the British treaties. The “Kings Negroes,” as the Maroons were alternately referenced, proved themselves to be more than formidable opponents of the plantation slaves (See Kopytoff 1979:51). The spiritual wars between the Maroons and plantation slaves (the denigrated “other side of people”) are catalogued in Maroon oral culture; they immortalize the “True Born Maroon” fighters from the days when “man a try man wid Obeah.” Maroon Sydney McDonald tells Bilby:

That time you know wha’ a man min a do? Man a try man with obeah, [to see] if man bad. Two of dem know obeah. *Those* [Maroon trackers] put something pon bóbosí awéngkini [non-maroons]... They say, “kill to rass, man!” (Bilby 2005:295)

Maroons boast about how their forefathers “walk pon” plantation slaves with the aid of British “gun and powder” and assert proudly that “backra never check pon nobody from Maroon ina Science.” The foiling of the Obia of plantation slaves is immortalized in song:

Me da Maroon-oo
 Becau governor gi me gun an poder
 ee-de-, me a Maroon-ee
 me a Maroon-oo
 me a Maroon soldier
 ee-de-, me a Maroon-oo
 we wi walk pon dem, galang, dasha
 we walk corner side
 ee-e-, walk pon dem-ee

Accordingly, when contemporary Christians scoff at Jamaicans who “oil and powda up” they exhibit a gross ignorance of the fact that British war machinery also involved the oiling and powdering of their guns and that the Obia wars between Africans and their enslavers were in fact nothing more than engagements with various oils and powders. In the end, the white

man's gun powder proved more effective than the African's herbal powders, even as Maroons blended both sets of "powder powers" to effect victory for the British.

The written records of ethnic rivalry on the plantations and within Maroon communities coupled with the oral records of the intense military encounters between plantation slaves and Maroons evince the existential crisis of Africans. Though defined by a single racial category called Black (and/or social category called slave), they had to as individuals and ethnicities, transcend this gross reduction of humanness. The power of Obia to transform lives cannot be overemphasized. The following story of Paul Bogle's capture by the Maroons as told by Abraham Goodwin to Kenneth Bilby demonstrates how time and again Obia changed the course of Jamaica's history. The story which deserves to be quoted in full, shows also the range of powers at the Obia man's disposal. The battle against Bogle and Gordon was won by Obia military intelligence which included the use of a "mystical" puss:

They [the Maroons] run against Paul Bogle and William George Gordon, from Pinnacle up to St. Thomas. There you have propaganda that he [Bogle] is going to keep church service. After de abolishment of slavery, he will take up all de slave for his own self. De English government never agree about that. De English government led him away to de Maroon to capture him, and de Maroon did capture him. De Maroon run him from up a Pinnacle over in Portland to Seaman's Valley, up to St. Thomas. He run into his church for rescue, but him never know. My Grandy min have some of his troop inside de church there, waiting for Paul Bogle. Him [Bogle] never know that dem have so much there waiting.

I going to tell you a secret now. It's hard, but I have to do it, since I'm giving it to you, then. Dem have a black puss inside de church—my great grandmother. One of de Maroon hold his tail, and two hold his head. And they have a piece of black velvet—I shouldn't give you that [knowledge]—rubbing de puss, and rubbing and rubbing de puss, till de whole church catch in fire.

And is there where they able to capture Paul Bogle and William George Gordon. They [Bogle and his men] run from there, and dem run into de church, think they were running fe rescue. And afta de mina de church, dem

meet up with fire. Dem jump through de window. And afta jump through de window of de church, dem jump outside. There de Maroons were able to catch him and capture him, and have him hang on a cashew tree. (Bilby 2005:319-320) *emphasis mine*.

Given this history of spiritual wars, it is surprising (or perhaps not) that at the close of the millennium we should find that the word Obia is rejected by present day Maroons (Bilby 1993). These people who were once “the Kings Negroes” and who in contravention of their Treaties also kept their own slaves, supported without remorse “the common hatred” which was formulated in the sentence “magician to the flames.” They played a pivotal role as part the war machinery that fuelled the capitalist Obia Factory. These questions are more than rhetorical: What would have happened to Africans in Jamaica if the Maroons had not signed the Treaties? What would Jamaica be like today if Tacky had prevailed? If Three Finger Jack had been successful? If Paul Bogle had triumphed over the puss? Whither Jamaica if not for Maroon Obia and “a wantonness of cruelty never exceeded by the most degraded barbarians.”

Of a fact, the spiritual terror which came to characterize slave society was carried out through bannings, lynchings, shootings, beatings, burnings, rapes, mutilations and electrocutions. JamAfricans were also “quartered and drawn” and those Obia practitioners who were not deported were often beheaded and their heads displayed on poles to deter other slaves from engaging in rebellion. For their part, the enslaved JamAfricans continued to engage in *petit* and *grand marronage*, poisoning, “sending sickness”, infanticide, abortion, suicide and the practice of their ethnic *Obias* and the pan African *Myal*, as well as “selectively appropriating the material and spiritual power of the masters for their own purposes” (Brown 2003:24-25). To say that the island of Jamaica was a hostile environment is to understate the endemic violence which became the written and unwritten rule of law. In his

article “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society” Vincent Brown theorizes the brutality of the slavocracy who in “employing dead bodies for symbols...marked territory with awesome icons of their power” (Brown 2003:24). Speaking to the severe punishment meted out to Obia practitioners who participated in Rebellion, he argues that spiritual terror became “even more menacingly, when managers and overseers extended the spectacular to the magical, as they tried to harness the affective power of the dead and awe of the afterlife to the material authority” (Brown 2003:24).

The savagery which constituted the attempts to change the mind of slaves from securing their own liberation was a form of cognitive terrorism, which showed that both slavers and the enslaved “shared religious idioms for thinking about death and the afterlife” (Brown 2003:29). The totem poles of severed heads and the meticulous and exaggerated tortures meted out to rebels were no less forms of transcendental magic than the talismans made from the body parts of the whites who fell victim to the rebel fighter. Mutilating corpses and depriving Africans of the rite of burial for their dead were effective means of effecting sacred authority. As evidenced in the following record of the brutal treatment of Obia practitioners who participated in the Tacky Rebellion, the plantation slaves and their Obia priests, overpowered by the potency of the combined magic of their Maroon counterparts and their slave masters, succumbed to their fate, in dying acknowledgement of a superior Obia. Accordingly, defiant suicide became an acknowledgement that the collective will of wanton cruelty was a force much stronger than the segregated will of dehumanized anguish.

At the place of the execution he bid defiance to the Executioner, telling him that it was not in the Power of the White People to kill him; and the Negro Spectators were astonished when they saw him expire. On the other Obeah-men, various Experiments were made with Electrical Machines and Magic

Lanterns, which produced very little effect; except on one who, after receiving many severe Shocks, acknowledged that his Master's Obeah exceeded his own. (Brown 2003:38)

This treatment of cognitive terror and spiritual warfare; this cataloguing of the intentional use of Obia by both blacks and whites, helps us to better engage with the “theoretical challenge” of “defin[ing] what kinds of work each [God and Spirit] does when historical circumstances require, and the ways the work of gods and spirits articulate with one another in religious system” (Mageo and Howard 1996:3). Vincent Brown notes “the cultural forms that sacred authority took underwent a continual process of convergence and re-definition as they resonated with the practical demands of domination on the one side, and of survival struggles within slavery on the other” (Brown 2003:46). In “African Spirituality: A Cry for Life” Bernadette Mbuy-Beya says alternately that “the greatest concern of today appears to be the frantic struggle for power in the hope of ensuring one’s own survival. As a result, there are the oppressors and the oppressed, but this oppression gives rise to new forms of spirituality” (1994:64). In JamAfrica, these “new forms of spirituality” converged into a single spiritual system known as Obia.

By Law, that is, by Clause X of “An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from irregular assemblies of Slaves”, Obia practitioners are men and women who communicate with spirits and “who [have] supernatural power.” In other words, Obia is mystical power and Obia women and men are experts who access and use this power. We know that although Obia practice involved some degree of pretension, this was by no means its characteristic feature. Obia was/is real, real enough to induce the British to sign Treaties with the Maroons and real enough for them to outlaw it on the plantations. By these two “Obia Acts” they effectively sought to “police Obia.” Police it they did, but eradicate it, they did not; for “there was

scarcely an estate which did not contain a priest or priestess of this deadly art, nor did there appear to be a single negro whose mind was not more or less under its influence” (Phillippo 1843: 248). It is this minding of Obia which was part and parcel of the cognitive terror which dominated the slave culture. The Africans insisted that they were *Obi* –somebody, and the slave masters used every available instrument of terror to impose their *Obi a* or will on a rebellious population. As Obia practitioners committed willful suicide, some were led to admit, that the force of capitalism which informed the will of their enslavers indeed seemed certainly greater than their own will to liberation. Among themselves, they struggled to a fragile unity, even as they fought against abuses within their own ranks and without.

With the advent of the British plantation system, *A New History of Jamaica* was written, one which stated that JamAfricans had a “kind of occasional Conformity, and join[ed] without Distinction in their solemn Sacrifices and Gambols” (Leslie 1740:306) even as the different tribal groups hated “one another so mortally that some of them would rather die by the Hands of the English than join with other Africans in an Attempt to shake off their yoke” (311). The plantation system also produced a new history of Obia; the racial divide, ethnic rivalry, brutal enslavement and a complex host of other factors served to create a multitude of occasions which provoked the use of Obia. The British plantation system produced an unheralded “minding of Obia” – it created the Obia Factory – a place where aspects of the sacred were profaned, redefined, traded and abused. It precipitated the gradual loss of *Òfó* – the principle of truth, fairness and justice. *Òfó* became one of the casualties of slavery – a context where for the African it was impossible to be good, and the God-force of *Obia* was experienced in such novel ways that there arose a “desperation for

the Spirit” and it is this “Spirit of desperation” which gave rise to alternative forms of “truth making” and JamAfrican Obia.

Yet against this backdrop of ambiguities, paradoxes, oxymorons and complexities; within this context of accusations of pretention and frightful reality; and in spite of what we think we understand about Obia, we are still led to ask “is there truly an occult knowledge which is truly a power, which works wonders fit to be compared with the miracles of authorized religions?” (Levi 1910:11) We still yearn to know, “Does magic exist?” “What is this Obia?” We still maintain that “it is important at last to find out what this *psi*, this *chi* this *wakan*, this shamanic gift” (Turner 2006:34) this Obia is. In the following chapter we address the perennial questions concerning Obia, we engage with more knowingly with this “bad business of Obeah” – this “unclean thing and powerful healing.” In short, we provide answers to the seminal questions: “What, as a fact, was this magic? What was the power of these men who were at once so proud and so persecuted?” If they were really strong, why did they not overcome their enemies? But if they were weak and foolish, why did people honour them by fearing them?” (Levi 1910:11)

CHAPTER 4

FROM OBIA MISSION TO OBEAH FACTORY:
SPIRIT THEOLOGY AND THE JAMAFRICAN OBIA CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Igbo *Dibia* established [himself] in the Caribbeans [sic] (and America) as *Obia* man (spelt “obeah” by the English). When an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* [healing] profession in another land or society.

Umeh, 1999

In historical Igboland, the *dibia* or *obea* was the person, usually a man, who could communicate directly with spirits... powerful and dangerous, and thus feared and respected everywhere, such ‘doctors’ provide the most common link between the visible and invisible worlds... *dibia* combined their sacred knowledge of the spirit-world with a practical pharmacological knowledge.

Chambers, 1997

The First *Obi* and Subsequent Ancient JamAfrican *Obia*

When we ask, “but what, as a fact, was this magic?” When we ponder the question, “what was the power of these men who were at once so proud and so persecuted?” When we sit in stupefied awe, fascinated by the marvelous accounts of *Obia* practitioners of yore, we are wondering, “if they were really strong, why did they not overcome their enemies? But if they were weak and foolish, why did people honour them by fearing them?” (Levi 1910:11)

When we ask, what is this *Obia*? what we are really asking is what kinds of esoteric knowledge came to Jamaica from Africa. We are really seeking to know, (1) what forms of knowledge did the various priestly class of Africans possess, (2) how was this knowledge used and (3) for what purposes? We are seeking to explore the utilization of knowledge and power in a particular context of enslavement, a context in which even popular forms of religion were prohibited and practiced in secret. This prohibition caused the blurring of lines

between exoteric religion and esoteric knowledge and the mistaking of charlatanism for sacred authority.

Writing on *African Religions and Philosophy* in 1969, Mbiti declares that “mystical power is not fiction: whatever it is, it is a reality, and one with which African peoples have to reckon” (198). Mbiti notes further that, “everyone is directly affected, for better or for worse, by beliefs and activities connected with this power” (ibid). This unwavering belief in the spirit affirms that the African knows something, accepts as normative and real that which others have assigned to the realm of fiction; the African knows that “when something stands, something else stands beside it.” The African accepts as true the existence of hidden forces which are subject to manipulation by those who know. In answer to the question, does magic exist? the occultist Eliphas Levi answers in the affirmative:

Yes, there existed in the past and there exists in the present, a potent and real magic; yes, all that legends have said of it is true, but, in contrariety to what commonly happens, popular exaggerations are, in this case, not only beside but below the truth. There is indeed a formidable secret, the revelation of which has once already transformed the world, as testified in Egyptian religious tradition, symbolically summarized by Moses at the beginning of Genesis. This secret constitutes the fatal science of good and evil, and the consequence of its revelation is death. (Levi 1910:11)

In the seeking after this fatal science of good and evil -- this unclean thing and powerful healing, we must appeal to the *Umandu* -- the Knowers who possess sacred authority; the priestly class of *Ndibia* who helped to create JamAfrican Obia. In the esoteric sense, we welcome the consequences of this revelation, for Death within the discipline of the Occult means Transformation. Esotericists have long maintained, as the Igbos have asserted that “he who pries into the supreme Spirit will confront his Chi” and that “such an experience is synonymous with transcendence and inner illumination” (Pennachio 1992:238). This Transformation speaks to the cosmological and transcendental gnosis which produces

radical changes in worldview, attitudes and *modus operandi*. By this scholarship we seek a transformation of prevailing approaches to *Obia* engendered by those hostile to the Wisdom of *Black Jamaica* -- those *Ofeke* whites who penned, respelled and Obeahed *Obia*.

Black Jamaica, says William Livingstone, was deluded by “an ignorant and superstitious receptivity” to *Obia*. According to Livingstone, *Black Jamaica’s* “capacity for thought was only shaping in embryonic darkness, and they obeyed no higher laws than the instincts of their animal nature” (1899:19). Of *Black Jamaica’s* “subjection to the superior race,” we should be careful not to subject the phenomenon to a later standard for “the commerce in black flesh seemed legitimate enough to those who engaged in it, and to the nation behind them at the time” (18). We should accept without sentiment the fact that “the negro was regarded as an inferior being created for the purpose of performing the menial work of the world. He was wild stock, and so was captured and sold” (ibid). The different ethnic groups of “black flesh” who arrived in the Caribbean

were absolutely devoid of moral responsibility. A rude assortment of ideas regarding supreme Good and Evil influences floated in vague confusion upon the surface of their understanding, but their conduct was dominated solely by the evil influences, of which *Obi* or *Obeah* was the chief... *Obeahism* is a superstition at once simple, foolish, and terrible, still vigorous, but in former times as powerful an agent as slavery in keeping the nature debased. (Livingstone 1899: 19, 20-21)

Things were indeed upside down. The sacerdotal art of Africa had become debased in the West. The *Igbo* attributes this upside down circumstance to “the operation of the *Igbo* basic Cosmic belief of *Akakata Akagwalu* whereby the rise and fall of nations, races, countries and families are subject to cyclic rises and falls may be part of the explanation” (Umeh 1999b: 175).

All nations, ethnic groups and individuals are subject to the *Akakata Akagwalu*. According to this pan human phenomena “the British people whom the Roman conqueror described as woard-smearred [sic] savages incapable of being educated, finished up being a Superpower capable of destroying Italy in matters of days or less. America, which was a colony of U.K. not long ago, can now over-run U.K. in matters of days or less” (ibid). In Congolese parlance “man turns in his path”; for the Egyptians, this is the spinning of the great “Wheel of Fortune.” In proverbial Jamaican: “today fi me, tomorrow fi yuh” and “every dag ‘ave im day and every puss im four o’clock.” And so it is that as Umeh states, “the ancient Igbo civilization and might whose shards or oil bean seeds are still easily found all over the world today, is being looked [down] upon by even some of their educated sons as coming out of other races and civilizations that actually came out of ancient Igbo and her civilization” (1999b:175).

The pervasiveness of *Ofeke* within and without Nigeria does not prevent the *Umandu’s* insistence on the preservation of Igbo traditional knowledge. “The Igbo traditional elders not only assert that the Igbos are among the earliest humanity of earth,” reports Umeh “but indeed emphasize that they are the first ones (*Ndi Mbu*) both in their relevant rituals and in their daily prayers when they, among other things, invoke ‘*Ndi Mbu na ndi Egede/Obi Mbu na Obi Egede*’ The first ones and subsequent ancient ones ever since/The first *Obi* and subsequent ancient *Obi* ever Since” (1999b:60-61). This chapter addresses *Obi Mbu* – the *first Obi* and its subsequent Ancient JamAfrican *Obi*, it examines the manifestation of Gnostic *Obia* – revealed Knowledge and Wisdom on Jamaican soil. It will be seen that this manifestation in JamAfrica is also a creolization; a traumatic and complex pan African indigenization which set the *Obia Mission* against the *Obeah Factory*.

Continental Origins of the Obia Mission:

Chukwu Abiama: “the Wisdom and the Knowledge that reveals himself.”

An interdisciplinary analysis of extant data on Obia in the Caribbean and Jamaica coupled with practitioner accounts of *Obia* in continental Africa allows for a reasonable reconstruction of the development of JamAfrican Obia. Umeh, a practicing *Dibia*, Dean and Professor of Estate Management at the University of Nigeria asserts that healers known as *Obia* practitioners in the Caribbean and America are Igbo *Ndibia*. He explains further that *Obia* is the “Igbo name for a *Dibia* who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands. When an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* [Spiritual Healing] profession in another land or society” (Umeh 1999b:28).

In fact, this used to be the order of the day in very ancient times when *Dibia* vast in the knowledge and practice of mystic travellings of *ikwu ekili* or *ikwu eli* or *ide nde* or *ibi ibuo* went to various parts of the world to provide services to suffering humanity,,, propelled by *Kpakpankpa Agwu* the mystic propulsion engendered by *Agwu* which guides *Dibia* to wherever his or her services are required. (ibid)

Among the Igbos, a *Dibia* is the “Master of or the Expert in Wisdom”, “the wisest of the wise” whose sovereign is God, *Chukwu Abiama*, “the Wisdom and the Knowledge that reveals himself.” For this reason the Igbos say *Chukwu welu, Olu Dibia*, “After God is *Dibia*.” Accordingly, “since God is *Chukwu Abiama*, (the Great Universal Chi, the Revealer of all knowledge and wisdom) who reveals to *Dibia*, the adept or master of wisdom and knowledge, it follows then that there in nothing which the *Dibia* cannot do except one thing, and that is *Onatalu Chi* [fate or destiny]” (1999b:86). This almost limitless power of *Dibia* Wisdom is encapsulated in the simple yet profound aphorism, *Dibia aha-agwo Onatalu Chi* meaning “*Dibia* does not cure or solve fate or destiny.”

Umeh's assertion that in his or her capacity as the Master of Wisdom the Igbo *Dibia* makes iterant travels to aid suffering humanity is confirmed by the first records of *Obia* among the English in the Caribbean. Reports out of Barbados in 1710 state that "No Negro... can doe anything of this [*Obia*], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros"; and that "upon Negros complaining that they are bewitched", they were cured by "an *Obia* Negro" (Handler and Bilby 2001:88). The fact that across the Caribbean, virtually all the estates were said to have at least one practitioner and that "the Negroes in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor them [*Obia* practitioners]; to these oracles they resort and with the most implicit faith, upon all occasions" (Edwards 1799:166) attests to the belief among enslaved Africans that *Onatalu Chi* is *Dibia's* sole prohibition." In Barbados, the slavocracy became aware of six major functions of *Obia* practitioners; (1) the preparation and use herbal medicines and poisons, (2) the use of supernatural force, (3) fortune-telling, (4) diagnosis of illness, (5) the making of fetishes and charms and (6) dream interpretation (Handler 2000). Among the Aluku (Boni) Maroons of Suriname,

Each village has its own *obia osu* (obia houses) -- shrines devoted to different classes of gods and spirits, such as papa, *kumanti*, *ampuku*, and others, that routinely possess mediums; these possessing *obia* offer advice, answer questions, heal the sick, solve various problems, and help to interpret the shifting social and political landscape. (Bilby 1993: 18)

The evidence leads us to confirm beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Igbo *Dibia* established himself in the Caribbean as *Obia* man. The evidence suggests further that s/he did so by the use of occult knowledge for as the story of the Senegalese practitioner at the Fort of Goree shows, and as one *Obia* man explained to me "the real *Obia* men did not come on

the slave ships”, nor was this spiritual intelligence known as *Dibia* in Bight of Biafra, limited to this part of the African continent.

The existence of *Kpakpankpa Agwu* or the mystic propulsion engendered by *Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge, validates the reports of “flying Africans” in the Caribbean and North America. It also helps to explain the demise of the famous Jamaican Obia man Alexander Bedward, who obviously having had some mystical revelation but without the benefit of proper initiation, announced to his followers that he could fly and ended up perishing in the asylum to which he was committed by the colonial authorities. But the “real” *Obia* man from “very ancient times when *Dibia* [was] vast in the knowledge and practice of mystic travellings” (Umeh 1999b: 28) could accomplish these seemingly miraculous feats effortlessly. Umeh says of these travel masters that

They invariably came back through the same *Agwu*’s safe conduct and propulsion and this is well encapsulated in the Igbo saying respecting *Dibia ije mbia ogwu* or *ije obia* as follows: *Egbe ada-ato na mbia* or *Egbe ada-ato n’obia* i.e., the *Dibia* herein described as the Kite, whose characteristics he or she shared with his or her *egira Agwu*, does not get stuck or get lost in his or her professional sojourn to other lands. In other words, like the Kite, which practices seasonal migrations, the *Dibia* invariably comes back if he or she so desires or is so propelled by *kpakpanka Agwu*. (1999b: 28)

It is within this mystical context that the Jamaican (and Caribbean) concept of “sucking salt” or “eating salt” must be interpreted. Many of the *Dibia* who came to the New World did not desire to go back by *kpakpanka Agwu*. And so as Cassacinarie reports concerning Obia man Congo Brown, “six months after the brothers arrived in the West Indies, ‘one of the brothers disappeared, bodily and completely’” (Cassacinarie 1895:20). Congo Brown who “had ‘married a wife,’ [and] accounted for his brother’s disappearance by saying that he had flown away back to Africa³⁷, and that he would have done so too, had he not eaten something that prevented his doing so, ‘salt’ (my informants, say).” In this instance, Congo Brown’s

marriage had caused him to “put down roots” so to speak in the Caribbean. This “grounding” in occult terms is called “eating salt”, salt being the alchemical substance that grounds the Spiritualist.

The *kpakpanka* Agwu explains the fearless determination, immense bravery and seeming willful suicide of numerous Obia practitioners, who defied the killers “at the place of the execution” by telling them “that it was not in the Power of the White People to kill [them]” (Brown 2003:38). Like the onlookers at the cross of the Obia man Jesus, “the Negro Spectators were astonished when they saw him expire” (Brown 2003:38), but the inner circle would come to broadcast the good news that “Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here” (Mark 16:6 KJV) in the same way that Diasporan Africans would retell the legend of the “Flying Africans”. It is these “real” *Obia* practitioners who came and went, those who fell in love and stayed and those who stayed for other divine reasons, coupled with their apprentices – specialists in various forms of knowledge who came via the slave ships and who were schooled in the “repeating islands” of the Caribbean; it is this class of men and women who answered the call of ensuring the survival of suffering humanity on the slave plantations. On Jamaican soil, where one eyewitness account attested to the fact that “no Country exceeds them in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods by which they put... to death a Rebellious Negro” (Leslie 1740:39), the English slavocracy found *Obia* practitioners worthy adversaries, more than equal to the task assigned them, that of providing assistance to sick and suffering. The relative success the *Mbia Ogwu/Obia* practitioners in helping suffering Africans to cope with their miserable fate which could not be changed, is to be found in the fact that the ancestral Knowledge itself became a casualty of this fate.

Back in the Niger Delta, this ancestral knowledge was still being preserved by the *Dibia*, the Adept or Master of Knowledge and Wisdom who holds a unique position within Igbo culture. The *Dibia* is usually described in esoteric language: “*Dibia* is the air or wind in the universe of which no one can fathom the head or the tail” (Umeh 1997: 76), says *Dibia* Machie Aroonu of Abaube Nando. By this she references the Spiritual Intelligence of the Knower which in the Western sense is, attributed to the element of Air. When it is said that “Knowledge and wisdom are holistic and so is *Dibia*. They have no end” (Umeh 1997:76), the *Dibia* is speaking to the Open-endedness of Language, the arbitrary limitlessness of limiting language which distinguishes the species and which has the burden of transmitting Knowledge and Wisdom. Accordingly, “those who have tried to find the English equivalent terminology for *Dibia* have wasted their time for there is no such English equivalence” (1997:76).

Dibia is made up of two words *Di* and *Abia* meaning the Master of or the Expert in Knowledge and Wisdom. And while he or she shares common knowledge and wisdom with *Ofeke* (non-*Dibia*), the *Dibia* stands feet and shoulders well above the wisest of the *Ofeke* by not only being in possession of, but also being an adept in, occult, esoteric, recondite and hidden knowledge and wisdom. The *Dibia* is *Abia* that sees the spirit, and is the wisest of the wise. In addition, the *Dibia* is blessed with special attributes, abilities, and faculties. (1997: i).

Alternately, the statement “*Dibia* is the ancestral Spirit masquerade whose real identity nobody can fully disclose without getting into very serious trouble” (Umeh 1997:77) references “the Burden of Silence” associated with mystical knowledge, the “pain of obligation” sworn to by initiates; “the Secret of the fatal science of good and evil,” referenced earlier by Levi, the consequence of whose revelation is death (Levi 1910:11). It is for this reason that the Igbo says, *A na-esi n’anya Dibia afu Mmuo* – “One sees the Spirit through the eyes of the *Dibia*” (Umeh 1997: 137); and *Ofeke malu ogwu Mmadu agwu* – “If

Ofeke is taught *Ogwu* humanity would perish” (Umeh 1997:97). Yet parallels (if not equivalents) of the Igbo *Dibia* are found throughout human societies. In the Western sense, the *Dibia* is the Magus whose profession is Magic, defined in esoteric terms as “the greatest wisdom and the knowledge of supernatural powers” (de Laurence 1915:394). It is that Plato tells us that “the wisest have the most authority” and “wisdom alone is the science of all sciences.”

The multiplicity of *Obia* cognates across Africa and indeed around the world, point to salience of the concepts “knowledge”, “wisdom”, “spiritual power” and “herbal skill” symbolized by the original “bi” morph. In his analysis of the cognate *Biame* found among the Australian aborigines bearing the similar meaning of *Dibia*, Umeh asserts that “all of them definitely derive from the same original source. The Igbo *Dibia* surfaces in America and the Caribbean as *Obeah* (*Obia* by Igbo spelling), in Polynesia as *Obaoba*, in Southern India as *Kurumba*, *Obia* in Ki-Kongo and Congo and so on” (Umeh 1997:80). The Akan cognates *Obi* meaning somebody and *obe* meaning woman contributed to the organic development of *Obia* in Jamaica. More specifically, the enslaved Akan, the majority of whom arrived in Jamaica because of war insisted that s/he was a *obi a oye* (good person); those who instigated the numerous rebellions were *obi a ne bo ye duru* - bold, audacious, many of whom were *obi a onim ade bi ye yiye* – experts (Kotey 1998:109). These *O-bibini* – Africans asserted that they were *o-biakofo* – better than their slave masters because they sought for *biako-ye* - unity and tried to *abia* – help each other survive their *obi a onnim biribi* - ignorant enslavers with the use of *abibiduru* – native medicine³⁸.

Igbo *di-abia* and Akan *abia* and KiKongo (*o*)*b-bi* and *Obia* are key terms in the creation of JamAfrican *Obia*. In occult terminology, these three ethnicities served as the *Makuku*

matatu or “Three Firestones” which cooked the mystical pot of JamAfrican Obia. They provided the Holy Trinity of *Obia* (Igbo), *Wan-Ga* (Akan) and *Myal* (Congo) being Spiritual Wisdom, Herbal Knowledge and Spirit Possession which form the basic architecture of Obia in Jamaica. Stewart argues that JamAfrican Obia is simultaneously a religious practice and a “protean institutional structure encompassing ethnic African and pan-African religious cultures which coauthored an African-derived understanding of mystical power as the capacity to use energy dynamically” (Stewart 2005b:90-91). This exemplary survey of the historical records reveals a range of descriptions that clue us to the multifarious nature of Obia as recorded (if not sanctioned) by whites. Stewart offers eight general descriptions of Obia during the pre-emancipation period:

1. Obeah as poison
2. Obeah as evil magic/witchcraft
3. Obeah as actual neutral mystical power
4. Obeah as ritual negotiation of invisible and visible forces (oath-taking and physical invulnerability)
5. Obeah as pharmacology and energy (empowered religious objects/charm work, root work/mystical technology)
6. Obeah as divination (detection, revelation)
7. Obeah as specialized religious knowledge reserved for the priesthood
8. Obeah as a religious institution with a foundational cosmology or several cosmologies, ritual life, philosophy and theology, iconography, ritual language, and text.

These descriptions suggest as Stewart argues that Obia constituted a form of priesthood with religious offices of spiritualists such as mediums and diviners. She argues further that the *Obia* is simultaneously religious practice and “a religious institution reflecting not one particular continental ethnic African religion but the synthetic institutionalization of ethnic African religious institutions on Jamaican soil” (Stewart 2005:41). Because of criminalization, this synthesis of ethnic African religious institutions occurred for the most part in secret.

Accordingly, “it is the secrecy around Obia that gives it a bad name.” Of a fact, the criminalization of Obia transformed the exoteric into the occult and rendered profane many aspects of this sacred science. The local aphorism “bad name worse dan Obia” became realized in the British discovery and re-spelling, actual re-making, transformation of Obia on Jamaican soil. Criminalization of African religious expressions coupled with the brutality of the slave system caused the iniquitous exchange of *Òfó* for Whip and created the upside down Obeah Factory.

Exchanging *Òfó* for Whip: The Creation of the Upside-down Obeah Factory

I Jikwo Òfó Na Ogu? Do you hold Òfó and Ogu? When asked this question, the Igbo *Dibia* must answer yes, for he or she is “next to God”. “*Chukwu welu, Olu Dibia*”, after God comes *Dibia* because in his capacity as the “wisest of the wise” the *Dibia* holds *Òfó* – he holds “truth” symbolized in the sacred staff of ancestral authority. This sacred *Òfó* is both political and religious in its guardianship of law and morality. *Òfó* is “the symbol of truth, justice, fair-play, uprightness, honesty and selfless service...*Ofo* is highly revered...*Ofo*, therefore represents all that is good” (Alutu 1985: 91). Thus it is said that “*Òfó ka nsi*” meaning *Òfó* is greater than poison and that “*Oji Òfó ada-ato n’ije*”, the just and truthful person is never lost in a journey. The concept of *Òfó* is the embodiment of the office of the *Ndibia*, the wise practitioners qualified to go on *Obia*, or healing missions. “Indeed without *Òfó* (actual or implied), the Igbo *Dibia* cannot be and/or perform” (Umeh 1997:49). It is *Òfó*, truth which allows the *Dibia* to practice with both hands, because *Òfó* goes with *Ogu*, justice or moral justification and also with *Alo*, heavy responsibility. Truth, Justice and Responsibility are synonymous with *Dibia* because after full initiation the *Dibia* holds *Òfó* staff in his left hand

and Alo staff in his right and from his “potent mouth” he extols *Ogu* – the principle of moral justice exemplified by forgiveness and forbearance.

For the peoples who came from the Niger Delta, Obia represented “all that is good” and Obia practitioners were supposed to “manifest integrity in all their dealings and utterances”. This is why they were “consulted with implicit faith upon all occasions”. The Karmahaly Negroes knew that “a knowledgeable *Dibia* must abide strictly to the implication of holding *Òfó na ogu* in his/her professional work. And [that] no requisite detail is too insignificant to be left out” (Umeh 1999a:259). They knew that “*Ogu bulu uzo; Òfó adi ile*” – “when *Ogu* leads the way, *Òfó* potency follows along” (Ibid: 258). They understood the ethics of *Dibia*; they appreciated the fact that “the *Òfó* symbol is so important to the Igbo people that every grown up man irrespective of rank and social status must possess an *Òfó*” (Alutu 1988:85). In a world predicated on the falsehood that Africans were animals and inferior beings, Africans revered the *Òfó* as the symbol of “truthfulness and righteousness expected to proceed out of the mouths of judges, priests and kings” (Ibid). Their lives depended on those persons who were “supposed to manifest integrity in all their dealings and utterances” (Onyeocha 2007:30). They made full use of the Obia missionaries.

Under *Òfó na Ogu*, the Igbo concept of perfection, *òménàlà* or traditional values dictate that “the weak, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the ignorant are fully protected and must never be punished and the guilty must not be spared. The debtor must pay his or her debt and the trader must deal on genuine wares” (Onyeocha 2007:28). The dire situation of enslaved Africans; the almost impossible task of holding *Òfó*; the loss of *òménàlà*; and the entrenchment of the Obeah Factory is encapsulated in this single observation of pre-
emancipation Jamaica:

It is curious to observe with what avidity they catch at every occasion of enjoying and exerting a petty authority their fellow-slaves. This propensity shows itself very early in life, and is no doubt generated and nourished by the system of domination over them. When the young negro is promoted to an office of superintendence and responsibility, he feels an additional pride and importance; he considers himself as then belonging to a superior caste; but, like too many of his white prototypes, he is prone to exercise but little moderation in his new office, to domineer with a high hand, and is more solicitous about his own prerogatives than the justice and humanity with which he asserts them. His maxims are – to have no consideration but for himself and his friends, and to retain his situation, at whatever expense of severity to those over whom he is placed. He himself has been domineered over by a driver, or head-man; it is now his turn to domineer over others. If, for instance, a negro is employed as a head wain-man, he has two boys given him as assistants; these boys he compels to perform almost the whole labour they catch and yoke the cattle, while he looks on, and drive and direct them in the wagon, while he rides at his ease on the shaft, or sleeps in the wagon. The poor boys perform their task with wonderful adroitness, under the terror of the whip of this their unconscionable task master; but they console themselves with the hope that they will one day be head-men themselves, when they will be just as unreasonable and harsh to others. (Stewart 1823: 261-262) emphases in original.

In post emancipation Jamaica, “moral honesty, or a conscientious regard to truth, was not only unknown, but unlooked for; no one expected his neighbor to tell the truth, or to be upright in his dealing, any further than suited his convenience or interest; even parents educated their children in all the arts of dissimulation, fraud and perfidy” (Phillippo 1843:250). The loss of *Òfó* contributes to this island-wide acceptance that “that the man who plays by the rules is the man who gets shafted,” even as *Obia* practitioners beseech the populace to carry out their affairs with “clean hands” and a “pure heart” (*obi*). In the upside down *Obeah* factory, *òménàlà* becomes encapsulated in the *Walk Good* folk song which encourages JamAfricans to “walk good on yuh way [so that] good duppy walk wid yuh.” From a continent where *Obia* symbolized “all that is good,” those assigned the Mission of *Mbia Ogwu* operated in a context where for the enslaved it was impossible to be good; a

place where even their religious counterparts were defined as “the most finished... Debauchees” (Leslie 1740:303).

In this *New History of Jamaica* where it was said that “no Country exceeds them in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods by which they put them to death,” Leslie also found unfortunate that he had to give “such a dismal Account” of the “Church Affairs of the Island.” Reporting that “church doors were seldom opened”, and lamenting the fact that “such worthless and abandoned men should be sent to such a place as this;” Leslie summed up the whole matter in one sentence: “the Clergy here are of a character so vile, that I do not care to mention it; for except a few, they are the most finished of our Debauchees” (Leslie 1740:303). In this dismal state of Church Affairs, “Holy orders were readily given to men who were imperfectly educated and of indifferent moral character. One minister bemoaned that fact that ‘the clerical office in Jamaica was a sort of dernier resort to men who had not succeeded in other professions’” (Patterson 1969:47). The country was described alternately as “an island of sin” and cast as an island of illiterates. Absenteeism; lack of educational facilities, high mortality rates; poverty of women (white and black); and the lack of qualified and able legislators and civil servants all contributed to the creation of the Obeah Factory. Patterson concludes that “the absence of the most educated and civilized members of the society also led to a complete breakdown of religion and morality among the resident whites since the local leaders were among the most profligate people imaginable. What was worse, the clergymen themselves were often among the most immoral in the island and the established Anglican church in Jamaica represents, perhaps, the most disgraceful episode in the history of that institution” (ibid 40).

And yet, “the sexual exploitation of the female slaves by white men was the most disgraceful and iniquitous aspect of Jamaican slave society” (Patterson 1969:42). Not even the young were spared as “rape and the seduction of infant slaves; the ravishing of the common law wives of the male slaves under threat of punishment, and outright sadism often involving the most heinous forms of sexual torture were the order of the day” (ibid).

Patterson continues:

It was common practice for a white man visiting a plantation to be offered a slave girl for the night. Moreton tells us that many of the white employees on the estate had a rotation system whereby they seduced every desirable female on the plantation over and over again. He also informs us of the practice of many of the attorneys who made a grand annual tour of the estates under their supervision with a large retinue of friends remaining at each estate for a number of days during which there were undescrivable scenes of debauchery, the female slaves being primed in advance for their coming. (ibid)

This “new” Jamaica was certainly not a place where the “the weak, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the ignorant [were] fully protected” (Onyeocha 2007:28) and were never punished and it was certainly not a place where the guilty were subject to the rule of law. But even as the Africans tried their best to hold *Òfó* amidst wanton cruelty, sexual exploitation and degradation; these dire circumstances produced a “multitude of occasions” which provoked them “to exercise the powers of Obi against each other” (Edwards 1799: 169). The Maroon Treaties prove this, as does the gross malpractice of Obia on the plantations. “Thus, as one of the demoralizing effects of slavery, the whole population may be said to “have gone astray from birth, speaking lies” (Phillippo 1843:252). The principle of truth was a major casualty of plantation slavery and in this “island of sin” enslaved Africans sought to hold unto *Òfó* by lying low through Ananyicism, djinnalship, and Quasheeism – archetypal strategies of “playing [sacred] fool to catch wise”.

“No one goes to the house of Ananse to teach it wisdom.” Encapsulated in this Akan proverb is the Wisdom of the Obia man, “the wisest of the wise.” Among the Akan, the Supreme Being is *Nyankopon*. His praise names include *Oboadee* (creator), *Nyame* (God), *Odomankoma* (Infinite, Inventor) and *Ananse Kokuroko* (The Great Spider, The Great Designer). *Ananse* is the name given to the Divine Messenger, who owns all stories about the *Nyankopon*. *Ananse*, The Divine Spider is believed to weave his web of energy which permeates the whole universe so that he may travel the many roads between the spirit-world and the physical world in order to carry messages back and forth. Like the Igbo *Dibia* then, *Ananse* trades in knowledges; he is situated at the crossroad between The Supreme Being and humans and it is his job to reveal the knowledge and wisdom of God, the ancestors and other spirits. Wisdom is revealed in myths or stories loaded with archetypal symbols which may “trick” the hearer. It is for this reason that *Ananse* is often called a “trickster” and the ability to use one’s wits to survive referred to as “Anancyism”. The “long-legged spider, with its his rapid movements, his venomous bite (to other insects) and his big medicine bag, is the prototype of the Obeahman and Anansi stories keep alive the belief in obeah and the faith in obeahmen, relating as they do, what may be called the bright side of obeah” (Cassacanarie 1895:3). Enslaved Africans invested “Anansi with a halo of preternatural powers, cleverness and luck” (ibid); his cunning and wonderful feats reminded them that they were somebody and that they could with confidence in self, build from their own center the world they wished to live in. It is so that as the wheels of the Obeah Factory turned, enslaved Africans, at every available opportunity, employed their wits to thwart the plans of the enemy. While Obia practitioners worked their genius in secret, at the secular level, it was Quashee who best embodied the genius as trickster.

“When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion” is proverbial Ethiopian characterization of the Jamaican Quashee. Quashee is the prototype of the sacred fool, who can “come out of face” or use words cleverly. Quashee, the Akan Kwesi or Sunday’s male child, distinguished himself variously in the Obeah Factory. If “you come from Moko”, you behave as if you are backward and fool-fool (stupid); if you use “Congo Saw”, you “cut up” words to stray from the point as far as open-endedly possible; if you are “bandoloo” or “samfie”, you are a deceiver or a lying thief and the djinnal or wordsmith genius (genie) who engages in the same act, is admired and revered where you tend to be despised. The slavocracy observed that “the most clever and intelligent Negro is usually the most deceitful and we have seen some with art enough to baffle the most expert lawyer that ever put question” (Patterson 1969:176). To the slavocracy Quashee was lazy; prone to doing everything wrong; child-like; always singing; happy-go-lucky and frivolous; extremely capricious; an excellent judge of character; yes, the Quashee-fool played the “signifying monkey”, perfecting an evasive, indefinable, disguised and ambiguous use of language.

Quashee had an incomparable ability to annoy the questioner and his ability to “play the fool” though stereotyped by whites, was also understood by most as a linguistic mode of resistance. In *Miserable Slavery*, the overseer Thomas Thistle became so enraged by a Quashee (who obviously underestimated Thistlewood’s depraved nature), that he had another slave defecate, insert the faeces into Quashee’s mouth and had it tied up for days (Hall 1989). Richard Madden M.D. who visited Jamaica during *A Twelve Month’s Residence in the West Indies* encountered Quashee. He found him of “a quibbling spirit, which he displayed in his interrogatories but for the purpose of producing a misunderstanding of the meaning of the magistrate’s observations” (1835:154). Madden was deeply concerned by the

fact that at emancipation, “it is a difficult thing to get a Negro to understand anything which he does not wish to hear; the more you try to explain a matter that is disagreeable to him, the more incapable he appears of comprehension; or if he finds this plan ineffectual, he endeavours to render the matter ridiculous; and his talent at rendering ridicule sarcastic is surprising” (ibid:155). The phrase “come out a face” is used to reference the ability of an offender to extricate himself from a “seemingly” hopeless situation by the use of clever argument. The following anecdote from Phillippo is a classic example of Quashee’s ability to “come out a face”:

“me don’t tief notin,” said a negro boy who was detected by an overseer in the very act of stealing sugar – again and again protesting his innocence. “What do you mean, sir? haven’t you got the stolen property now in your possession?” “But me don’t tief it, me only take it, massa.” “What do you mean by that?” “As sugar belongs to massa, and myself belongs to massa, it all de same ting-dat make me tell massa me don’t tief it; me only take it.” (Phillippo 1843:252)

Accordingly, while in the Maroon communities, Akan culture was exemplified in military intelligence and Kromanti Play; on the plantations, the enslaved Africans from the Gold Coast resorted to linguistic intelligence of the Great Architect Anansi as a major means of resistance. *Anansi* became equated with Igbo *Dibia*, and *Anansi* stories and Quashee together symbolized the ability of the African to “pop story” and to engage in “big lie and story”. In a sentence, notwithstanding the Obia missionaries, “the real life situation of the slave... was one in which there was a complete breakdown of all major institutions – the family, marriage, religion, organized morality... there could be no kind of guiding principle, then, in the socialization of the slave, except that of evasion, which he learned from hard experience” (Patterson 1969:178). In this equivocal, evasive, emotive Anancyism, in the transformation

from Obia Mission to Obeah Factory, it becomes hard for the outsider to “pick sense out of nonsense.”

While for enslaved Africans, plantation slavery was the single instrument of Obeah; the slavocracy maintained that “Instruments of Obeah” included “any Blood, Feathers, Parrots Beaks, Dogs Teeth, Alligators Teeth, broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-Shells or any other Materials relative to the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft”. More than a hundred years after this law, Cassacinarie (1895) noted that these “instruments” were subject to much superstition and that such superstitions were fully utilized by ingenious “impostors who masquerade as Obeahmen for the purpose of impressing ignorant people, and bringing them by degrees into a fit condition of mind to be easily duped” (1895:69). Bemoaning this unfortunate situation, Cassecinarie expounded on the ethics of Obia citing that

A real Obeahman has no need of such articles, nor of such devices, and it may be safely said that no high-class Obeahman will make use of his knowledge or power, to make money, and that in only two particulars is the taking of money or fees of any sort considered permissible, and that only *when the desired effect has been produced*: these are (a) For the ‘dressing of fields,’ and (b) for the advising, and preparing of “bush” medicines. A person professing to be an Obeahman proposing anything counter to this should at once be considered and treated as an impostor; for it is a proof that he is not what he pretends and that he *can do nothing*, so, if he does not behave himself, it will be for the benefit of the Art and its real students if he is prosecuted. (Cassecanarie 1895:69) emphasis in original

Indeed, “it will be for the benefit of the Art and its real students” if imposters are prosecuted, because as de Laurence affirms *true magic* “only requires a strong faith in the omnipotent *power* of all good, that can accomplish everything if it acts through a human mind which is in harmony with it, and without which nothing useful can be accomplished” (de Laurence 1939:404). It cannot be overstated therefore that *Obia* is concerned with the

use of spiritual or occult knowledge; it operates by the faculty of the human mind. It is neutral mystical power; its ideal is good, but it can also be used for evil purposes.

In the context where *òménàlà* was systematically attacked, the lines between good and evil were not as clear-cut. In many instances the Obia practitioner in his role as punisher was often cast as an evil doer. Very often the stress and strain of day to day life turned many of *Dibia's* apprentices into charlatans, or worse angry men and women. Many practitioners, both men and women, resorted to vengeful attacks, willful murders and blatant extortion. Even on the continent “some *Dibias* were such wizards in sending potent punitive sacrifice that it was not enough for one to rely on one’s innocence as the only defence against such spiritual missiles” (Umeh 1997:94); on the island where “man to man [was] so unjust” spiritual warfare was the order of the day. The feats of Barat, the “noseless” Obeahman, give some insight into the operations of the Obeah Factory. Being ostracized because of his physical impairment and distemper, Barrat often used his powers to secure work, or rather to injure those who refused him gainful employment. A young man related this story to Cassecanarie:

Another time, some years after that, my uncle was making some repairs to his house, and I and some other men were working with him at the job. Barrat asked for work, but my uncle disliked him, and refused to employ him. One morning as my uncle was in the act of sawing a piece of board, Barrat turned up, and stood for some moments watching him. He then said, “You’re cutting that board too short!” My uncle said, “no I’m not,” and took up the board, and, laying it over the space it was to cover, found it some inches too short. Taking another board, he laid it over the space, and marked the length off with his pencil. On his beginning to saw it, Barrat said, “you’re cutting that board too short again!” My uncle said “no,” but placing the board over the space, found it two inches too short. A third time, my uncle took a board and marked it with his pencil two inches longer than was required. As he was cutting it, Barrat said “you’re going stupid! It’s far too long this time.” By this time, my uncle was very angry, but he laid the board over the space, and found it five inches too long. He then marked off the five inches accurately, and proceeded to cut it; as he was doing so, Barrat laughed at him, and told

him, “You’re too short again!” and it was some inches too short. Then my uncle and Barrat had a quarrel, and Barrat went away. But a little while later, as my uncle was paring off a corner of his work with a chisel, Barrat came back again, and said to him, “Look! your hand is cut!” And my uncle’s left hand had a very bad cut, right across the centre of the palm. It bled profusely, and pained him a good deal; he was a good deal alarmed, but Barrat laughed at him; after a little, Barrat thought proper to go off and gather some green beans, with which he dressed the wound. As he did so, he told my uncle, “You’ll be alright to-morrow morning.” ...Next morning, *there was no scar or trace of any wound on my uncle’s hand.*” (Cassacinarie 29-30)

Ben Dorick, a contemporary of Barrat, was a much more jovial fellow who used his powers to frighten and entertain:

I have often seen Dorick take a handkerchief off his head or waist, and throw it on the ground, when it at once changed into a snake. He had only to take hold of its tail, when the handkerchief again took the snake’s place. One night we were together down at Palmiste, and we heard music in one of the houses. Dorick said to me, “there’s a dance going on there, let’s go to it!” I refused, as I did not know the people of the house, and neither of us had been invited. But Dorick rode off to the house and I followed him. When near it, we got off and tied up our ponies. Then Dorick said, “just you watch, and I’ll show you some fun!” We went towards the open door and saw the people dancing; Dorick stepped in, and as he did so he took the handkerchief off his head and threw it into the middle of the room. It no sooner touched the floor, than it turned into a snake, - a large yellow-tailed cribo! The people were all startled and frightened, some ran shrieking out of the doors, and some jumped through the open windows; but the master of the house came up to Dorick and begged him to take away his snake. Dorick picked it up by the tail, and as he lifted it, it again became the handkerchief, which he tied round his head. He got a drink from the man, and then we went home. He could turn all sorts of things into snakes, and one time when he was doing ‘stick play’ with another man, he suddenly turned his stick into a snake, greatly to the discomfiture of his antagonist. (Cassacinarie 1895:31)

We can be certain therefore that as *Dibia* Umeh informs us, “there are so many occult, magical and mystical feats a *Dibia* can do... there are also so many poisons, spiritual and other psychotropic attacks *Dibias* know how to perform with potency which nobody today is willing to attempt” (Umeh 199a:254). This is because “*Mmadu aha-emecha/lfe onwelu ike*

ime”, “a person should not carry out every act or doing he/she is capable of executing” (ibid: 248).

The above aphorism also explains why it seems that Obia practitioners did not conquer their enemies. The *Dibia* asserts that the one thing he cannot do is to interfere with fate or destiny. When he goes on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* his duty is to help suffering humanity, he cannot stop the cycle set into motion by God, or the *Kalma kalma* (cause and effect) created by human beings. The *Dibia* understands that *Ochuchu*, punitive sacrifice comes from both God and man. *Ochuchu Mmuo*, punitive sacrifice by God, The Great Spirit, “explains the rise and fall of great civilizations and empires, the rise, growth and extinction of peoples, etc. An outstanding characteristic of *Ochuchu Mmuo* is its permanence or irreversibility” (Umeh 1997:94). Accordingly, “the land sold by the Spirit is clearly beyond human redemption” (95). *Ndibia* works within natural law or “*ife di n’Ele* and within natural laws *Dibia* should not attempt preventing the soil from consuming corpses” (Umeh 1999a:248). Further, “*Ana egbulu Dibia/Nsi aya ekuo (nay a)*”, any land or place where *Dibia* is killed turns into wasteland for deposition of *anya* droppings (265); and “when evil, evil deed or abomination is left unredressed for a year, it turns into a vengeance that has become rooted on the land” (254). The contradictory omen of the Obia Mission and the Obeah Factory explains why Jamaica is simultaneously the “murder capital of the world” and the country which holds the Guinness World Record for the most churches per square mile. Yet, from Wisdom to Superstition; from Obia Mission to Obeah Factory; and from *Òfó* to Whip the Great Wisdom *Chukwu Abiama*, the Great Architect Ananse *Kokuroko*, and the Great Being *Nzambi* re-veiled *Obia* in the universal symbol of infinity; the eight pronged wheel of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church.

From *Abiama-Obia* to Jah-Rastafari
Eight Denominations of The JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church

Why di Obia man dem mus open Church... Een, I waan yuh tell me why di Obiaman dem mus open Church?

Modda Woods, 2006

What is a Balm Yard? A Balm Yard is a Holy place that is wholly consecrated to God Almighty for the cleansing and healing of the nations. Where only the holy spirit of God alone is allowed to do the Royal work of healing.

Howell, 2001

“Why di Obeahman dem mus open Church?” For emphasis, Modda Woods repeated this question. It was not a rhetorical question, she meant for me to give her a reasonable answer. What had I discovered so far in my research that would help her to understand this propensity of Jamaican Obiamen to “open Church?” Modda was in the middle of her latest discourse on spiritual warfare among Obia practitioners and was bemoaning the fact that many a good Revivalist gone “spoil”. To her, it seemed that too many “spoil” Revivalists, and “every little Scienceman” was opening Church. This matter of Obia practitioners “opening church” has been a vexing issue since the advent of Christian Myal Obia (1784). Yet even before the Christian Myalists, Obiamen had some sixteen years (1768) before founded the Myal Obia Lodge or Secret Society. The advent of *Myal* is penned with a tone of venom for the “execrable wretches” (Long 1774:416) or Obiamen. At these Myal Dances, there was a master of ceremonies called “Doctor” (Phillippo 1843) who performed rituals to demonstrate power over death. Indeed, “the lure hung out was, that every Negroe, initiated into the myal society, would be invulnerable by the white men” (Long 1774: 416-417), and thus as a religious society, Myal was established as a political response to white rule.

The Myal Society as the first organized religious community among enslaved Africans in Jamaica was a political organization which sought to break the yoke of white rule. This first known African Church in Jamaica was a source of political power fuelled by all the available ethnic African spiritual forces or Obias. We note two things – active proselytizing, and secrecy. The response to Modda Woods’ question is that from very early in the establishment of Jamaica society, Obia Priests “opened church” as a deliberate and necessary response to the creation of the Obia Factory. These Obia churches provided (and continue) to provide a communal space for healing and protection, and for the empowerment of the individual and collective will. Eric Lincoln in the preface to Leonard Barrett’s *Soul Force*, tells us that “the black man’s pilgrimage in America was made less onerous because of his religion. His religion was the organizing principle around which his life was structured” (Barrett 1974:12). Lincoln, in affirming the important place of religion in the lives of New World Africans reinforces continental religiosity which is based on an understanding that the spiritual is political and that theology informs and precedes sociology.

Myal Obia therefore constituted a religious response to oppression. As a communal form of worship The *Myal* Society also served a range of social needs. *Myal* Obia was the religious principle that served, in the words of Lincoln, as the enslaved African’s “church, his school, his forum, his political area, his social club, his art gallery, his conservatory of music. It was lyceum and gymnasium as well as *sanctum sanctorum*” (Barrett 1974:12). Obia religion was the enslaved’s “fellowship with man, his audience with God. It was the peculiar sustaining force which gave him the strength to endure when endurance gave no promise, and the courage to be creative in the face of his own dehumanization” (12). The Obia Doctors founded Churches because Obia exemplified the human being’s innate

predisposition to religion. Cognitive scientists define religion as “any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to supernatural agency” (Whitehouse 2004:2), and Occultists agree with them that “religion is our whole utopia, and it is also the desire and need of humanity” (Levi 1910:396). Eliphas Levi offers further that each person who understands the human need for religion inevitably argues for a “universal and hierarchic orthodoxy, [the] restoration of temples in all their splendour, [the] re-establishment of all ceremonies in their primitive pomp, [as well as the] hierarchic instruction of symbols, mysteries, miracles” (396). Accordingly, this theology of the JamAfrican Obia argues for the recognition of Obia as universal or catholic religion and the eight major religious cultures as constituting the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church.

The JamAfrican Obia practitioners’ reliance on Obia as the “knowledge and the wisdom that reveals himself” provides for a rethinking of African spirits and Gods, “not as the embodiment of satanic evil... but as gods of providential liberation” (Lewis 2004:191), as Gods of liberating knowledge and wisdom. Revealed knowledge and wisdom provided military intelligence, healthcare, social organization, legal advice, counseling, religious denominations and impacted every aspect of the enslaved’s life while they endured within an otherwise morally bankrupt, corrupt and irreligious society. Even then, as they do now practitioners of JamAfrican religion insist that: “we are more Christian than them [orthodox religions]”, even as they maintain that it is they who “worship in spirit and in truth”. JamAfrica’s homage to Akan *Ananse Kokuroko*, The Great Spider and The Great Wisdom as realized in their reliance on *Abiama-Obia* revealed wisdom and knowledge shows the importance of Spirit-Epistemology. This enduring reliance on the omnipotence and omniscience of spirits has led to the selective incorporation of additional spirits over the

course of the religion's development. This tendency towards incorporation rather than exclusion allows for the theorizing of Obia religion as universal, as catholic.

Catholicism defines universal religion, it recognizes that “tendency toward religion is inborn, an endowment, a biological predisposition, a propensity, existing for just such a purpose, the communication with spirits” (Turner 2006:55). Catholicity defines our innate predisposition to reason; it takes the human ability to reason as the absolute and infallible basis of reality. Catholicity accepts language or the universal word as the interpreter of reason and speech its basic revelatory device. Levi, the Occult Roman Catholic priest, posits that “faith is nothing else but reasonable confidence in this unity of reason and in this universality of the word” (1910:86). In Catholicism, the true adept

accepts everything that is, and denies only what is not. He wills true religion, practical, universal, full of faith, palpable, realized in all life; he wills it to have a wise and powerful priesthood, surrounded by all the virtues and all the prestige of faith. He wills universal orthodoxy, the absolute, hierarchic, apostolic, sacramental, incontestable, and uncontested catholicity. He wills an experimental philosophy, real, mathematical, modest in its conclusions, untiring in its researches, scientific in its progress...entire justification is in our thoughts and our works. (Levi 1910:399)

Accordingly, I posit that Obia Catholicism is identical to the Cognitive Science of Religion which seeks for and advances “principles which are general, and therefore, apply without special privileges to all religious phenomena in all places and at all times” (Lawson and McCauley 1993:20). Cognitive Theory, Occult Philosophy and Obia Theology may be seen as mutually reinforcing modes of Catholicism which advance the pan-human reality that God is Mind. Anthropomorphism of god concepts is taken not as voluntary, but rather as innate, as natural.

The JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church

Alpha-N	Obia Denominations	Approx. Dates of Emergence	Critical Moments
o	Abiama-Obia	1517 – present	1760
1 - A	Kromanti Obia	1739 – present	1768
2 - B	Myal Obia	1768 – transformed	1841/2
3 - C	Christian Myal Obia	1784 – transformed	1831
4 - D	Kumina Obia	1841 – present	1841
5 - E	Revival Obia	1860 – present	1865, 1921
6 - F	Mpokominya Obia	1909 – present	1914
7 - G	Science Obia	1915 – present	1933
8 - H	Jah Rastafari Obia	1933 – present	1938

This basic diagram illustrates the four hundred and ninety-three (493) years of African religious cultures in Jamaica. The approximate dates of emergence are based on a synthesis of the historical data currently available. It should be noted that because Obia was initially and is still primarily an oral tradition, some of the dates used reflect the first documentation of worship rather than the establishment of a denomination. In many cases, the advent of a new religious culture was documented only when the group became large and or strong enough to attract the attention of the authorities, or when some singular event attracted attention. This is true for example in the case of Myal, Christian Myal, Mpokominya and Science Obia. The period 1517 to 1739 is cast as the foundation period for Obia, denoted by the term *Abiama-Obia*. As argued earlier, the first African slaves arrived in Jamaica in 1517 under the Spanish, from which time the “Carmahaly Negroes” introduced *Obia* into the island. During this period, *Obia* developed as an organic response to enslavement and different ethnic groups came to adopt the term *Obia* as appropriate designation for African forms of healing and worship. Three dominant strains of *Obia* emerged under Gold Coast

(Akan), Niger Delta (Igbo) and Congo-Angola (Kongo) ethnicities and Kromanti (Akan) Obia became legitimized by the British in 1739 with the signing of the Peace Treaties.

Myal-Obia emerged in 1768, the year a law was passed decreeing the death penalty for slaves caught attempting to desert the island. The Act states that “Slaves attempting to desert from the island in any ship, boat, &c. and being convicted before two justices and three freeholders, to suffer death or other punishment, at the discretion of the court” (Long 1774:489). This 1768 law, Clause X of the 1760 *Acts of Assemblies*, the ruthless retaliation for the Tacky Rebellion, in addition to the rigorously enforced thirty year old Maroon treaties basically closed off all avenues of escape from the plantations and the island. This meant that enslaved Africans had to devise alternative coping and resistance strategies; foremost among them would have been a call for unity. Seventeen sixty-eight was also the final year that the planter Edward Long served in the Jamaica Legislature and Assembly. After being elected as Speaker of the Assembly in 1768; he served until September and left Jamaica the following year (1769) for good due to ill-health (Morgan 2006). His *History of Jamaica*, published five years later in London, gives the first eyewitness account of the *Myal* ceremony. *Abiama*-Obia, *Kromanti* Obia and *Myal* Obia constituted *JamAfrican* religious culture for 267 years until the “Separate Baptist” Preacher George Liele introduced ecstatic Christian worship to Jamaican *Myalists* in 1784.³⁹

Revival Obia was established in 1860/1861 as an indictment of Moravian missionary proselytizing. *Kumina* Obia became established with the arrival to Jamaica of recaptured Africans between 1841 and 1865. Rastafari Obia was formed in 1933 when Leonard Howell who had returned to Jamaica from New York the previous year, began preaching the divinity of H.I.M. Haile Selassie I. (Hill 1985, Chevannes 1994, Spencer 1998, Lee 2003) The advent of

Mpokominya was first documented as a Revival group that appeared in St. Mary in 1909 (Wedenoja 1988). Science Obia was made public in November 1915 at the trial of a convicted “20th Century” Obiaman in Kingston (Elkins 1986). The Critical Moments column in the diagram signals major rebellions, shifts and/or upheavals associated with Obia denominations. Most of the critical dates speak to important rebellions and/or revolts. The 1760 Tacky Rebellion; the 1831 Sam Sharpe Rebellion; the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion; the 1921 Bedward March; the 1933 establishment of Rastafari and the 1938 Labor Uprising, are all Obia engineered resistance to white rule. The years 1841 and 1842 reference the “digging up of Obia”. The year 1914 is considered important for Mpokominya Obia which got a boost in membership from Jamaicans returning from Panama after the opening of the canal.⁴⁰ The year 1933 signals the prolific use of de Laurence Occult manuals and the formation of Rastafari by Scienceman Howell.

JamAfrican Spirit religions are therefore conceptualized as expressions or “emanations of *Obeah*” symbolizing “an evolved ethical alternative” by exiled Africans to white racism, white theology, [and] Euro-Western Christianity” (McPherson 1988:83). In terms of organized religious forms, these emanations of Obia may be seen as a *Myal* movement which has its roots in the pan-African-derived Myalism of 1768 later to be transformed into the Christian-Myalism of the 1860s. As such, JamAfrican religions are properly seen as comprising the Obia Catholic Church which began with an ethnic-African and pan-African spirituality transformed into a pan-human universal religion. “Movement” also signals the phenomenal transformative essence of Obia and Obia emanations as political tools for individual and collective liberation as well as cultural reservoirs of Spirit knowledge and wisdom.

Lexical Spirituality
Spirit Terms as Obia Denominations

With regard to nomenclature, JamAfrican religions have all been “spirit terms”. In this terminology of Spirit, all the names of the religious cultures, except for Revival are African or part African in origin and the etymology of all terms (African, English, Indian and Spanish) bear spirit meanings. Accordingly, the enduring salience of Spirit as seen in the religious discourse of believers is first realized in the linguistic commitment to Spirit as shown in the African derived and spirit nomenclatures of these denominations. This “Spirit Terminology” has largely been ignored by writers throughout the history of Jamaica. These native spirit terms have been misunderstood, misinterpreted and misused by the slavocracy, missionaries, historians, academicians, and the like whose Eurocentric bias blinds them to a parasitic scholarship insistent on “reducing a complex, multifaceted variety of beliefs and practices to a single negative entity that [can] easily be targeted and opposed” (Bilby 1993:43). In the Obia Factory, Obia may have been “given a bad name” by ruling whites whose rule of “divide and conquer” violated African moral codes and served to reinforced this negative stereotyping. But the Africans who named their religious faith opted for a term which signaled not only spiritual power but the human impulse towards good. In negotiating the existential drama of enslavement they found common among them a “bi” morph which affirmed their humanness, their divinity and their right to freedom; and this Spirit Terminology which commenced with *Obia* was to continue in the naming of each major religious tradition throughout Jamaica’s history, demonstrating that the wisdom of Africa has survived in spite of being subjected to a protracted period of cognitive terror.

Against the backdrop of relentless “hegemonic misinterpretation” of Spirit, JamAfrican religions continue to privilege spirit nomenclatures which reject the imposition of

non-native categories yet embrace the universal doctrine. *Obia*, *duppy* and *Myal* remain constant despite literized versions such as Obeahism, Duppyism and Myalism. Revivalists refer to themselves as Revival, Spiritual, Zion, Sixty and Sixty-one, despite the scholarly convention of Revival Zion and Revivalism. Likewise, Rastafari reject the worldwide distribution and use of the term Rastafarianism, as a term of reference for their religion. For this reason, the enduring battle between orality and literacy in the JamAfrican religious context may be considered a spiritual *word-fare*, which for practitioners and believers constitutes a perpetual “resisting against the isms and schisms” (Marley, “One Drop”). Cognitive scientists theorize that “people use their religion to serve practical rather than intellectual purposes and expect their gods to behave like people –meaningful social agents... religion that achieves and maintains these qualities remains relevant to adherents and succeeds as a stable cultural system” (Tremblin 2006:185). As the following engagement with denominational nomenclature shows, the *Obia* Catholic Church has been the most stable of JamAfrica’s cultural systems.

Abiama-Obia (1517). *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* is a Healing Mission authorized by *Chukwu Abiama*, God as Divine Wisdom and Knowledge. Those commissioned to go on *Obia* are *Ndibia*, the wisest of wise, those next to *Chukwu Abiama* in the hierarchy of beings. The *Ndibia* or the Healing Missionaries are endowed by *Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge with holistic knowledge and power to administer *Ogwu* (medicine) and offer *Afa* (sacrifice). It is through the Spiritual Work of these Healing Missionaries that God’s Wisdom and Knowledge is revealed. *Agwu* – the Spirit of Knowledge provides *Ogwu* medicine. But this medicine is not medicine in the Western sense. *Ogwu* in literal terms is “the end”, and accordingly “*Ogwu* is “the ultimate solution beyond which lies *Onatalu Chi*, the fate or destiny” (Umeh 1997:87).

The Obia Missionary cannot change fate or destiny he can only provide the ultimate solution within the patient's destiny. As owner of *Ogwu*, the Obia practitioner is therefore able to address all ills which afflict humanity; the power that he has comes from God and thus those who consult him have the utmost faith in his ability. From 1517 when the first Africans arrived in Jamaica as slaves, the Igbo *Dibia* and his ethnic African counterparts came to Jamaica on *Mbia Ogwu*. British plantation slavery made their job increasingly urgent and by the time the Maroon treaties were signed in 1739 the Igbo *Dibia* had established himself in Jamaica as Obia man. He was referenced variously as the "Obia Doctor"; the "Do Good Man"; the "Four Eye Man; and the "Professor". From the *Abiama-Obia* Mission of the "Calabar Negroes" and Windward Maroons, eight distinctive denominations of Obia emerged, the first of which was Kromanti Obia.

Kromanti Obia (1739). Kromanti is "spiritual force which protects a man in danger" (Herskovits 1930b:335) and Kromanti Play is a Maroon healing ceremony which involves spirit possession by ancestral forces. The Africans who arrived in Jamaica from the Coromantin Fort on the Gold Coast distinguished themselves by Kromanti Obia or military intelligence. In their insistence that they were *obi* (humans), they utilized spiritual military knowledge to show themselves as *obi a ne bo ye duru* – bold *obi a nim ade bi ye yiye* – experts. This forced the British to accept their personhood, allow them their freedom and utilize their expertise. As both healing ceremony and spiritual knowledge the term Kromanti embodies the basic principles of Obia. Kromanti Obia is traditionally found among the Windward Maroons, the original Karmahaly Negroes. The power of Maroon Obia has already been discussed, and this is known to result from the seminal position of the Obia practitioner within Maroon communities.

The most famous of all Maroon Obia practitioners is Nanny of the Karmahaly-Windward Maroons. “Two towns were named after this formidable woman, and the stories that Maroons tell today about her feats in battle are truly amazing. We have no historical record of Nanny actually fighting, but legend has it that Nanny thwarted the English by catching their cannon balls between her buttocks and returning the fire” (Kopytoff 1973:84). The name Nanny is derived from *Nana*, meaning ancestor or “the Moral or Religious Exemplar” and indeed Nanny Obia woman became the Nana of the Maroons, although Nanny is not known to have had any biological children, all Windward Maroons consider themselves Grandy Nanny’s children (Bilby 2005). In the terms Kromanti and Nanny we find embedded the universal concept of Spirit.

The original designation Coromantin references Akan and Ga speaking peoples as well as the port of their embarkation in the Gold Coast (Ghana). The use of an Akan term to describe healing rituals and ceremonies proves the cultural dominance of these peoples who believed in their innate right to be Obi. The Will to live forced them to sign “Peace” Treaties with the British, and the terms of these agreements transformed their kin on the plantations into their enemies. This swearing against their kin on the plantations constituted a loss of *Òfó*, a transgression against the Earth goddess and the ancestors; among their own, the Maroons became *Ofeke*, non-*dibias* trying to “eat with two hands”. In the legendary battles against plantation slaves, the Maroon Obiaman became known as the *Ofeke* man or glossed as *Fete* (Fighter) man. I disagree with Professor Bilby that the origin of word “Fete” is English word “fighter”. I posit instead that the etymology is the Igbo word “*Ofeke*” which would have been current among Obia practitioners. Even though the Maroon Obia practitioners of different ethnic backgrounds could not in effect be called spiritually ignorant,

the signing of the treaties was the single most important event in the enslaved African's fight for freedom on Jamaican soil for it instituted the Obeah Factory and sanctioned the gross misuse of spiritual power. In effect it legalized Obia malpractice or evil *Ogwu* (medicine). It was perhaps a necessary evil, but it was an evil nonetheless and those who had come to Jamaica on Obia Mission used the term *Ofeke* to separate themselves from those who created the Obeah Factory.

Yet the history is much more complex than a separation of *Ofeke* from *Dibia*. As demonstrated earlier, the Africans from the Gold Coast fought ceaselessly to liberate the entire island from the stranglehold of the slavocracy. But almost every plot was betrayed. Jamaicans are often angry when they hear that the Maroons captured plantation slaves and returned them to the British, but often elided from this discourse is the fact that before the Treaties, these very slaves fought tirelessly to secure the freedom of Africans. It is indeed ironic that it is the failure of Obia intelligence which led to the destruction of the Accompong Maroon town (Kopytoff 1973). The Obia man had failed to divine that the town would be attacked and hence in 1743, some five years after the signing of the Maroon Treaties, the "obea man" was said to be in disrepute for failing to foresee the British attack which destroyed their town:

at Present their obea man is disregarded for having assure them that their last Town was inassailable by the Whites who in a few days afer this Report, convinced them of the Falseness of it, by burning thier [sic] Houses & bringing them into a Submission. (Kopytoff 1973: 87)

Having been "burnt" into submission, the Accompong Maroons forced the hand of the the original Karmahalays (Windward Maroons), thereby securing a complex freedom and establishing a spiritual divide that permeates JamAfrican culture to the present day. Within the wider society, the word "fe" would become a "fighting word" and Jamaicans would taunt

each other with an emotive “say fe” as a code phrase for declaration of war. Just “say fe” if you want to “fight with words” (start an argument); just “say fe” if you want to throw some punches; just “say fe” to declare your harmful intent or ill-will towards your conversant. Jamaicans would also come to “draw chalk line ‘gainst” each other and “mark it down ten” with an “X” as the esoteric practices of *Dibia* became profaned in the Obeah Factory.

From their Karmahaly beginnings the Maroon communities would come to possess their own ritual language known as Kromanti language, as well as a distinctive creole containing not only a blend of ethnic African and English terms, but also Arabic (Bilby 2005). Other important aspects of Maroon tradition include the significance of the number four and healing plants known as Weeds, which distinguish the original four founding ethnic groups. As with the subsequent development of Myal Obia on the plantations, Kromanti Obia as the religion of the Maroons was, in effect, the first Secret Society of free Africans in Jamaica. The Maroons were intent on maintaining their Will to freedom and when the Maroon *Obia* men became *Ofeke* men, the plantation slaves formed a society of their own. The *Ofeke* men officiated at Kromanti Play were not playing with the plantation slaves, they were saying “kill to raas”, and plantation slaves resorted to Congo Science, they responded by “ketch[ing] Myal.

Myal Obia (1768). “Myal is a spirit...is a spirit”, says Miss Queenie, revered Kumina queen to the researcher Dianne Stewart (Stewart 2004:72). And it is no accident that enslaved Africans on the plantations responded to Kromanti Obia with Myal Obia for as late as 1939, a Maroon Fete Man told researcher Archibald Cooper: "You learn obeah from mial. All that mial is is that you dance with a duppy [ghost]. The dead person seize you and give you a message that tells you what to do. You can learn obeah from them that way. And

obeah - it isn't always evil. I can do good with my obeah as well as I can do harm" (Bilby 1993:64). Myal is derived from the Kikongo terms *Mayaala* or *Mayâla* meaning "the one who rules or leads" (Stewart 2005:50), or "physical representations of power" (Warner-Lewis 2003:190). The lexical item Myal is also related to the Kikongo term *miela* (plural of *mwela*) meaning "breath...energy coming from human beings but also living breath from planetary living energy as well as cosmic living energy" (Stewart 2005:50). Noting that breath can also come from living plants, Fu-Kiau advances further that "spiritually, when we speak of *mwela*, we are referring here first to the elders in the community and second, to the ancestors" (Stewart 2005:50). He makes link with plants/trees and ancestral worship which were integral to Myal ceremonies. "Myal is a spirit" – the parallel of Igbo *Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge. To "ketch myal" is to access knowledge by spirit possession and this meaning still exists today among Jamaican spiritualists who "ketch myal", in the same way that their Guyanese counterparts privilege Akan nomenclature when they access ancestral knowledge by "ketching comfa."⁴¹

Cassidy and LePage's *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (2002) notes that the etymology of Myal is unclear but offers Hausa *maye* meaning sorcerer or wizard, intoxication, and return. They note that "all of these senses are present in the Jamaica use of the word" (Cassidy and LePage 2002:267). As with the case of Obia, the Hausa term *maye* may be seen as providing for linguistic convergence and the meanings of intoxication and return are clear descriptions of important elements of *Myal* ceremonies. Through *Myal*, Obia as spiritual doctoring and spiritual intelligence becomes formalized and publicized through the spiritual power of ancestral worship and dance. Stewart argues for "*Myal* and *Kumina* as symbiotic ritual processes that facilitate the distribution of cosmic energy for life-enhancing purposes"

(2005a: 156). The synthesizing effect of Kongo spirituality on the plantations paralleled that of Akan spirituality in Maroon communities.

As noted previously, the Myal Society was the first recorded Church of enslaved Africans. The advent of Myal Obia served to distinguish communal from individual practice. By conducting communal rituals which sought to “dig up Obia”, the word also came to reference spiritually charged items. The spiritual cleansing associated with Myal Obia led whites to the conclusion that Myal and Herbalism are essential components of Obia (Phillippo 1843). More than one hundred years later, in 1898 would “‘Obeah’ would be deemed “deemed to be of one and the same meaning as ‘myalism’.” This communal spirit possession ceremony was officiated by Obia Doctors who danced by the help of herbal medicines. Myal men “adopted every possible means to increase their numbers,” the major advantage of membership being “exemption from pain and premature death; from death, especially as designed by white men” (Phillippo 1843:248). The Myal Dance and Kromanti Play in their myriad forms came to be known literally as “working the Spirit”. The proof of healing at these ceremonies was “the Obeah ingredients extracted from victims’ bodies such as pieces of glass bottle and snakes” (46), evidencing Obeah malpractice known as “working Obeah” or “iniquity working.”

This “digging up of Obia” proved the power of “Congo Science” which was again demonstrated in 1841/1842 when another period of “digging up Obia” coincided with the arrival of Kumina practitioners on the island. The relentless policing of the Maroons after the Tacky rebellion led plantation slaves to organize around “Congo Science”. These spiritual activities show the early distinctions between the different types of Obia on and off the plantations. This is evidenced by the fact that Beckwith’s research on Jamaican folk traditions

in the early decades of the twentieth century (1919-1924), revealed not only a new class of practitioners glossed by Beckwith (1929) as “Pukkumerians”, but also uncovered the existence of Maroon Obia practitioners who called themselves “Myal men”. This designation of Kromanti practitioners as Myal men attests to the similarities between the *Myal* Dance and *Kromanti* Play and to the traditionally strong relationship between the Maroon and Kumina denominations. These ceremonies are antecedent to the Revival Table, Kumina Duty and Rastafari Binghis. The Myal Society had a comparatively brief period of proselytizing (16 years) before the “frantic struggle for survival” caused Africans to also make use of the life enhancing properties of the Christian Holy Spirit. Having conceded to the equal and oftentimes more powerful white man’s Obeah, they incorporated the spirits of Christianity into *Myal* worship and named themselves “Spirit Christians”. Organic development of the Obia Mission had consolidated into four foundational and interrelated streams, Igbo holistic knowledge and wisdom; Akan “somebodiness” and military intelligence; Congo Myal spirit possession and ethnic and pan-African Herbalism. Spirit Christianity represents the incorporation of the “Civilizing Mission” into the Obia Mission.

Christian Myal Obia (1784). Self-styled “Spirit Christians” caught the attention of the Jamaican authorities in the 1820s. Insisting that they were not mad, but rather that they had “the Spirit” (Waddell 1970) these JamAfrican Myalists blended aspects of Christianity into their African spirituality to achieve what Stewart (2005b) calls *Christian Myalism*. JamAfrican Obia practitioners used terms such as “Spirit Baptists”, “Spirit Methodists”, and “Native Baptists” (Turner 1982), to reference the multiplicity of diffuse religious groups which sprung up all over the island, evidencing the fact that the spirits of Africa had officially embraced the spirits of Europe. The emergence of “Spirit Christianity” was occasioned by an increase in

white missionary activity. The opportunities for social mobility offered by missionaries who build schools and churches caused JamAfricans to don their spiritual mask. Christianity provided an opportunity for more persons to become Obia practitioners, even as “those of the doctor class like Simon Magnus, entered into the church-fold for sake of whatever gain they could make by the white man’s new influence, the white man’s Holy Spirit” (Nassau 1904:125).

The context of this emergence of Christian Myalism deserves some attention. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, the island was alive with missionary activity. The Moravians, American (Native) Baptists, British Baptists, Methodists, Scottish Presbyterians, the London Missionary Society and the Church of England were all trying to “save the souls” of JamAfricans. This consolidation of Christian missionary activity came nearly forty years after the former American slave George Liele began preaching in Kingston in 1784 and thirty-two years after he built the First Baptist Church (1788) establishing the ministry of the Native Baptists. While the first missionaries, the Moravians who came in 1754 had minimal success, George Leile’s ministry which started in Kingston was very successful and soon spread to other parts of the country through the work of itinerant preachers. The success of Leile’s ministry was due to the fact that his ecstatic style of Christian worship found fertile ground among the island’s spirit centered population. Although, in Jamaica Leile’s mission eventually came to represent the more orthodox form of Black Baptist worship, his ministry was rooted in the North American “breakaway” Protestant denominations of the “Separate Baptists” and “Shouting Methodists” (Pulis 1999). These sects separated from the orthodox churches in order to engage in more expressive worship. Separate Baptist meetings were characterized by worshippers “crying-out...falling down as in fits, and awakening in

ecstasies; [with] both ministers and people [having] impulses, visions and revelations” (Hudson 1983:161).

Accordingly, when the white missionaries began to proselytize in earnest, the ground work had already been laid and as John Shipman, a Wesleyan Methodist missionary noted “every man who is able to use a form of prayer, however imperfectly, immediately thinks he has a right to set up as a *Teacher*, or *Preacher*” (Turner 1982:57). The prevalence of these “uninformed and self-created instructors” meant that the nature of worship services depended entirely on the leader of a particular group; and as such what came to be known generally by the term Spirit Baptist or Native Baptism denoted a continuum of worship practices from identifiably African forms at one end to distinctly Euro-American brands at the other end.

During this period, while public spirit practices were freely conducted under the banner of Christianity, the religious leadership of these spirit worship services was assumed primarily by free colored and black men. Some enslaved Africans and Obiamen also become preachers. In fact, while Obiamen tended to also occupy positions of authority as headmen and drivers, Spirit Christian leadership was more arbitrary. Kamau Brathwaite offers that missionary activity provided a space for more JamAfricans to assume leadership roles as

the *public* leadership of a large mass of the slaves shifted from obeah-men to black preachers – evidence, certainly of creolization, since it was now an element of the white man’s religion that was being used by the slaves for their own purposes, though the extent to which the majority of slaves made any real distinction between obeah-men and black (Christian) preachers cannot be determined. (Brathwaite 1971:162-163)

The “Spirit Christians” who initially rejected the idea of sin, reinterpreted the sacrament of Baptism and the idea of the Holy Spirit within African cosmology and belief and identified with the sacrificial person of Jesus Christ and his salvific blood. Accordingly, persons were

said to “have The Spirit” (presumed to be the Holy Spirit by whites) when under varying degrees of possession. Such possession was evidence of conversion; it constituted a “Convince” or a “Conviction” (Turner 1982). And while on the surface, it appears that Obia and Myal practitioners had been replaced as religious leaders, this in fact was not the case. In fact the proliferation of “Convince” and “Conviction” groups represented a reinforcement of African modes of religiosity as

each man was also, in a way not understood by the Europeans, a priest, and through possession (induced by communal dancing to drums) could not only communicate with the gods, but become and assume the god. In Jamaica, Black Baptist worshippers were often possessed, as were ‘pagan’ cultists, and not always under the prompting of the drums. (Brathwaite 1971:219)

Christian Myalism therefore represents the interaction of two different approaches to Spirit which saw the adoption of elements of Christianity within an African framework with a resultant change in the face of Myalist ideology – the banner of “invulnerability to the white man” being replaced by the badge of “Conviction” or “having the Spirit.” This was a more than subtle shift in JamAfrican religious politics. When slaves became missionaries, the Christian gospel was reinterpreted as a message of liberation and so absorbed and disguised the enduring quest for “invulnerability against the white man”, while ecstatic worship of the (presumed) Christian Holy Spirit allowed for the islandwide practice of JamAfrican religion. The synthesizing effect of “Congo Science” on JamAfrican Obia was further realized when Kumina practitioners entering the island as free persons completed the existing Myal practices with their own Ancestral Society which like its predecessor concerned itself with ceremonial healing and the “digging up of Obia.”

Kumina (1841). Derived from the KiKongo etyma *lusakumunu* and *sakumuna* which mean “ancestral blessing” and “to bless” respectively, *Kumina* is the fourth denomination of

the Obia Catholic Church. *Kumina* as “a memorial ceremony for calling down ancestral spirits and African gods” (Brathwaite 1971:124), maintains the terminology of spirit which characterizes JamAfrican religion. *Kumina* is a distinctive Obia denomination in that it has virtually no Christian influence and is an exclusive society of blood relations. The *Kumina* Ancestral Society was formed by Kongolese receptive Africans who settled mainly in St. Thomas. Their healing ceremony is called a “Duty” and is derived from the “Kongo verb *kamama* meaning ‘to feel an obligation to carry out an act or keep a promise’” (Laman 1964: 207). Spirit messengers are called *Nkuyu* and *Kumina* practitioners worship “the Great Spirit” *Nzambi* from which the common terms for spirits terms *zombi* and *jumbi* are derived. Other Kongolese “bi” cognates which may have contributed to the foundational concept of Obia include *bamvumbi* – “ancestral dead”, *banvumbi* – “astonishing supernatural power” of the ancestral dead, and *baka bwanzambi* – “spirit creatures.”

The existence of these “bi” morphs in KiKongo signal the importance of positing *Kumina* as a denomination of the JOCC although the Society was founded by post-emancipation immigrants. The similarities in the Myal Dance and *Kumina* Duty coupled with the prevalence of “bi” morphs points to the importance of Kongo spirituality in the evolution of JamAfrican religion. Further, the use of marijuana (*Kannabis Sattiva*) as Kongo Tobacco is thought to have been introduced into the island by these indentured laborers, some four years before East Indians arrived in 1845 (Bilby 1985). Rastafari’s sacramental smoking of “ganja” (a gloss of Kikongo *diamba*), was influenced by its use by *Kumina* practitioners, as well as Mpokominya and Revival Obiamen who had already incorporated Hindi spirits, particularly the deity Kali (hence Kali Weed) into JamAfrican religion. During the 1840s Hindu

and Kongolese influences on the JOCC would prove important in the transformation of Christian Myalism into Revival Obia.

Revival '60 and '61 (1860/1861). JamAfricans found in the English word “Revival” a way to legitimately “re-Myalize” their religious landscape. Spirit Christianity became formalized under the designation Revivalism when the “Great (Moravian-Christian) Revival” aimed at remedying the great loss of converts to “Spirit Christian” groups, was transformed by these same “lost souls” to produce Jamaica’s fifth Obia denomination. The word “Revival” embodies the concept of *recurring incarnation* which characterizes JamAfrican religion. Revival or the “power to restore temporal well-being” in the face of tragedy, is as Stewart (2004:76) argues “derived not from soteriological beliefs about Jesus’ death but from African beliefs about *recurring incarnation* as the locus of life sustaining power.” Kromanti, Myal, Kumina and Revival practitioners, “testify through the body that health and well-being are restored when the embodied living and disembodied living demonstrate their relational interaction” (2004:76). Revival (1860/1861) was institutionalized one hundred and five years after the first missionaries (Moravians) arrived in the island, seventy-eight years after the arrival of first Native Baptists and nineteen years after Kumina. Revival replaced the nomenclature “Spirit Baptist” in a new wave of Myalism. Over time, ’60 Revival would come to be called Revival Zion (spiritual place) and would designate the more Christianized version of Myal which privileged the “Holy Spirit”. ’61 Revival distinguished itself as the more African form of Revival Obia, said to “deal wid duppy” and other earth bound spirits, as well as the legion of other existing energies. Eventually, ’61 Revival would also come to include Mpokominya Obia, as these more stigmatized practitioners sought to rid themselves of the comparatively greater degree of demonization.

Being established after Kumina but before Mpokominya and Rastafari, Revival was Jamaica's largest indigenous religious group for over 100 years--until the 1970s when the Rastafari Ethiopianism gained prominence with increased local and international conversion. Scattered across the landscape of Jamaica, groups such as The Isaiahs, Convince/Flenke, Bedwardites, the Millennium Band, Zion, as well as Mpokominya all came to be referenced as Revival (Wedenoja 1988, Elkins 1977). This "recrudescence of the old religious spirit in a new and more dangerous guise[s]" (Williams 1934:76) evidences the "Spirit Theology" which defined JamAfrican religion from its earliest days, when Leslie remarked that "they [the Africans] have a kind of occasional Conformity, and join without Distinction in their solemn Sacrifices and Gambols" (Leslie 1740:306-307). Indeed as one Zionist declared to Stewart (2005:67) Rasta "a Zion too! Ahll a we a wan"; meaning Rasta is Revival also; we are all one. Even more poignant was the response of a '60 Revival healer to my question of what to call her Church: "Well" she said breathing deeply, "dem call wi Obia, dem call wi Zion, dem call wi Bongo, dem call wi wrap head, dem call wi Rasta."⁴² It is interesting to note that these appellations run the spectrum of Jamaica's indigenous religions.

(mum)Mpokominya (1909). The word Pukkumania is formed by the joining of two Kikongo terms; *mumpoko* the name of a Kongolese healing plant (Stewart 2005b) and *Kumina* meaning "ancestral blessing". The conventional orthography is Pocomania (Spanish *poco mania*) meaning "a little madness" (Seaga 1969), which differs from the first documentation of these "Poko people" known as "Pukkumerians" (Beckwith 1929). Both the KiKongo and Spanish etyma bear spirit meanings which aptly described this sixth denomination of the Obia Catholic Church which is believed to have been founded in St. Mary circa 1909 (Wedenoja 1988). I propose that the term Mpokominya was coined by the joining

of the Kikongo words *mumpoko* and *Kumina* and the dropping of the prefix *mum*. This new form “Pukkumina” or “PoKumina” was transliterated by Spanish phonology and orthography to become Pukkumania (*pocomania*). Jamaicans returning from Panama after the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 would have facilitated the Spanish pronunciation of this JamAfrican term. Early Poko groups were said to have been run and supported by a fair amount of these returning residents.⁴³

The two linguistic derivations of this term are not antithetical. Within African cultures all plants are considered to have Spirit and it is for this reason that herbalism is a foundational feature of Obia practice evidenced further by the fact that within Maroon culture, the different ethnic groups (nations) can be distinguished by their personal Weeds. Additionally, it is well documented that prior to the Western pathologizing of madness, the madman was considered a spiritualist who people consulted for divine messages (Szasz 1970; Foucault 1971, Crowley 2007). “Poko” people were considered mad not because they “denounced” the existence of God, but rather because they carried him around in foul smelling Kongo pots (containing blood and other pharmacopeia) to keep healing services. These Mpokominyans were indeed considered mad because “people used to run them out of the districts because of the bad smell.”⁴⁴ In Mpokominya we hear the echoes of the Spirit Baptists defiantly asserting that “they are not mad, they have the spirit.”

Further in the Obia denomination and lexical item “Poko” as it is referenced by locals, JamAfricans pay homage to the spirit tradition of herbal medicine which defines African and diasporic religions. Poko people became ostracized not only for their “foul smelling pots” constructed from the Kongolese concept of the *makuku matatu* or “three firestones” (Fu-Kiau 2001) but also for their unrepentant use of Kongo tobacco (marijuana) during healing

ceremonies (Bilby 1985, Moore 1953). It is this Kongo Tobacco which Rastafari came to embrace as the “Wisdom Weed” providing I-sight⁴⁵ for the “healing of the nation/s”. From the Papa Weed, Mandinga Weed, and Ibo Weed of the early Maroons (Bilby 2005), and the Myal Weed (*solanum somniferum officinale*) of the 1760s (Long 1774) through the Kongo Tobacco (*kannabis sativa*) of the 1840s; also the Kali Weed of the 1930s (Bilby 1985), JamAfricans reaffirmed the power of herbs to heal and protect. The recourse to (mum)Poko signaled Obia as the “doctor” word and Kongo Tobacco as the most powerful healing plant in Jamaica. Mpokominya, the sixth Obia denomination, emerged at the same time that de Laurence’s Occult literature began to find its way into the hands of JamAfrican Obia Doctors.

de Laurence Science Obia (1915). In 1915, eleven years after Leslie Thornton’s bold statement on the “waning influence” of the Obiaman, de Laurence’s *The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses*⁴⁶ was found among the spiritual repertoire of a Kingston Obia man. This 1915 outing of de Laurence’s contraband Kabbalistic grimoire five years after its publication confirmed the advent of a new “Science” and a different set of spiritual powers on Jamaica soil. Although the term “Science” had long been used to describe Obia practice, this latest “Science” was different in that it was not transmitted orally; on the contrary the 397 year old oral tradition had become reaffirmed and complemented by the literary tradition. In the absence of a precise, progressive and affirming tutelage into the mysteries of life by a revered and proficient practitioner as obtains in Africa; and within the context of the continuous and relentless demonization and persecution of African practices and people, “Science” represented a systematically organized written body of spiritual knowledge that could be easily accessed.

“True Magic is the greatest of all natural sciences, because it includes a knowledge of visible and invisible nature. It is not only a science but an art, because it cannot be learned out of books and must be acquired by practical experience” (de Laurence 1915:394). This Occult definition of Science references nothing short of the attainment of Knowledge and Power in spiritual matters (Crowley 1994) and is synonymous with Obia defined as “The magick of the Secret Light” (Crowley 1996). Given the general misconception of the term Magic, de Laurence was led to reiterate that

The true significance of that term [magic] is spiritual knowledge or wisdom, in contradistinction to merely speculative philosophy or changeable scientific opinion. But the vulgar have come to believe “Magic” to mean mere sleight of hand performances, or perhaps conjuring or dealing with the devil, or with the spirits of the dead. (1915:394)

Anthropologist Donald Hogg in speaking to “Magic and Science in Jamaica” was one of the first scholars to advocate Obia as Scientific Religion, Hogg was forced to admit that some of his preconceived notions about Jamaican Magic were “ethnocentric and faulty”. His observation of Jamaica Obia practitioners revealed scientific methods founded on a healthy skepticism and rigorous experimentation with new techniques and materials. Hogg took the Jamaican Obia practitioners’ resolve to “doubt everything” and “prove every spirit” seriously. Against the tide of contemporary scholarship, he was moved to conclude that

That which we call “magic” is not necessarily mere superstition, but may be the product of intelligent, careful searching for knowledge. It does not remain the same over the years, but changes and adapts according in response to changing problems and ideas. Magicians are not usually charlatans, nor do they rest secure in traditional knowledge or beliefs – they pursue their work sincerely and many of them search constantly for better ways in aiding their clients. Thus the application of the term “science” to some practice usually considered magical may not be entirely inappropriate. Obeah men, so to speak, may be Scientists too... [and] persons that we call scientists... may turn out to be obeah men. (Hogg 1961:5)

Scientists are self-styled *Physicians* who take seriously de Laurence's "philosophy of disease and medicine". When Obia practitioners say they are Physicians, they do not mean this in the biomedical sense, but rather in the spiritual and mystical sense. For JamAfrican Obia practitioners, the English word "Physician" is the closest they can get to the Igbo word "*Dibia*" for which "there is no English equivalence". de Laurence espouses a philosophy similar to that of the ancient *Dibia*. In his 1939 treatise, *The Great Book of Magical Art, Hindu Magic and Indian Occultism* he affirms, among other things, that "a physician must seek for his knowledge and power with the *spiritual light of his soul*" (439); that a physician "must dare to use his own reason and not cling to antiquated opinions and book authorities" (441) and that a physician "should be an Alchemist; that is to say, he should understand the chemistry of life" (447).

JamAfrican Obia practitioners' appeal to the spiritual wisdom of ancient Africa via the Jewish and East Indian literary occult tradition served to increase the potency of these spirit masters by re-affirming the African (and human) spiritual self and by giving access to a different set of spiritual powers. "Science" then is another spiritual power. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2003) posits that this new form of spiritual power significantly impacted Obia in three ways: (1) It led to the creation of two distinct yet overlapping forms of practices, traditional (oral) Obia and "literary" Obia. This distinction was also reflected in the differences between Obia practices in rural and urban Jamaica, where practices in the rural areas remained grounded in herbalism as opposed to the urban variety which mixed herbs with manufactured substances. (2) It instituted the commodification of the practice-introducing a multiplicity of oils, perfumes, sprays, powders, and other incidental paraphernalia. This commodification led to the clients of Obia practitioners being referenced

as people who “oil and powder up.” (3) It added a new set of spiritual beings and entities to the Obia pantheon which includes St. Michael, Saschael and Raphael. Other celestials such as Casuel and Rutibel became prominent and the “wickedness” of “Coolie Duppy” became legendary.

This “new” Science also provided a means by which to access the “secrecy around Obia that give it bad name.” By utilizing a literary tradition, Science Obiaman not only benefitted from the prestige associated with modern notions of science (Hogg 1961), but also opened up a way for laypersons to access the knowledge and wisdom proscribed by the sacred oaths of the oral tradition and secret societies. Additionally, as Obia practitioners tried out new healing techniques based on written formulas, they engage each other in spiritual battles reminiscent of the early days when “man a try man wid Obia” to see if him good. Hindu and Jewish mystical texts would come to serve as “keys” for Obia practitioners of the twentieth century.

The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses or “The Black Bible” is “key” among a number of Occult manuals including *The Key of Solomon King*, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, *The Book of Magical Art* *Hindu Magic and Indian Occultism*, *The Mystic Test Book of The Hindu Occult Chambers* and *Secret of Magical Seals*. The Obia repertoire of mystical and magical manuals which was initiated by William Lauron de Laurence (1868-1936) continues to be expanded as new publications emerge. Obia practitioners who use Occult manuals are said to work de Laurence or Science. These practitioners are primarily male and are referenced as “Sciecemen”, “De Laurence men” and “Physicians”. The Physician is, with good reason, feared and honored as “di real Obiaman” and “di big Obiaman” who knows “the higher heights and deeper depths” of Spiritual Wisdom. “Science” denotes the most modern

practice of Obia and while conditions in Jamaica today are radically different from those which obtained in 1655; the 1898/1899 Act which was revised in 1973 remains on the Jamaican law books and de Laurence's publication are still contraband, even as Obia Doctors continue to do their duty of tending to the spiritual welfare of the populace.

By the early twentieth century, the Obia Catholic Church was an almost seamless blending of aspects of African, Asian, Euro-American and Middle Eastern religions which proved that JamAfrica was "one nation under G.O.D." These Good Obia Doctors (GODS) had to contend with the fatal science of evil. It is this dark side of Obia, which led the first Rastaman Howell, himself a Science Obiaman, to declare Jamaica an "Obeah Factory" and to wage war against Obia malpractice. As a Physician, Howell knew the power of ill-will, of disposed evil. On his return to Jamaica, he was confronted with the gross profanation, secularization, commodification of the African ancestral legacy, the entrenchment of the Obeah Factory. In *The Promised Key* his "rage against the dying of the Light" is as inspired as it is cathartic. Howell defied popular belief that the "keyman lock di door and gaan". He established himself as *The Promised Key* and this "Keyman" established himself as a twentieth century Obia Commissioner. He founded a secret society and under the banner of Congo Science decreed that: "a Balm Yard is not a Hospital neither is it a obeah shop" (Howell 2001:11). He had come to administer a "ramkin dose of poison" on the Obeah Factory in the name of the Obia Mission. In the beginning of JamAfrican religion was the Word Obia, and by Rastafari, Obia came to have the last word too; it produced Dread Talk and gave JamAfricans and the world, a New Name for God. In the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari, we find *Chukwu Abiama* re-veiled as "the Wisdom and the Knowledge that reveals himself."

Jah Rastafari (1933). Rastafari means “Eternal Power and Godhead” and Haile Selassie means “Power of the Trinity” (Wint 1998:163). Ethiopian Amharic *Ras Tafari* is an honorific title meaning “Lord” or “Prince. This title was given to Haile Selassie I, a direct descendant from the line of two of the greatest Hebrew Kabbalists, The Wise Man Solomon and Jesus, the Christ. Howell, a reputed Science Obieman, would recruit Hibbert and Dunkley, two other Kabbalists to become the “Holy Trinity” who founded Rastafari. The full title for the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I the “Almighty God” who was “a living man” revered around the world as Jah Rastafari is "His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia and Elect of God." Haile Selassie I (Ge'ez: ኃይለ ሥላሴ) means "Power of the Trinity." It is in Rastafari that the African conceptions of “Word Power and Sound” would be most realized as the Science Obiamen who started the religion would also construct their own language, write their own books and get possessed by means of “The Holy Herb” created for the “Healing of the Nation/s”. Moreover they would declare themselves “messengers” who would “teach the youths about [their] roots and culture” (Luciano, “Messenger”).

Chanting “A New Name Jah Got and We Call Him Rastafari”, this eighth denomination of the JOCC would move from its grassroots beginnings to become Jamaica’s most renown religion. Born out of the social upheaval of the 1930s, the message would evolve from a racist Ethiopianism to a universal pan-humanism expressed through the doctrine of I-n-I. In keeping with the lexical commitment to Spirit, Rastafari would successfully integrate a homonymic oral tradition with Biblical and Kabbalistic literature to espouse the universal message of “One Love.” They would consolidate the ceremonial music of their ancestors into the rhythms of Reggae music, dubbed “edu-tainment”, even as

they rejected the English language and even aspects of the Jamaican Creole as inadequate vehicles for their spirit concepts. Obia's lexical commitment to Spirit therefore becomes fully realized in Rastafari Dread Talk and aspects of Rastafari livity. This livity or lifestyle was organized around the Sacrament of the Holy Herb; a focus on herbalism and a naturalistic simple way of life.

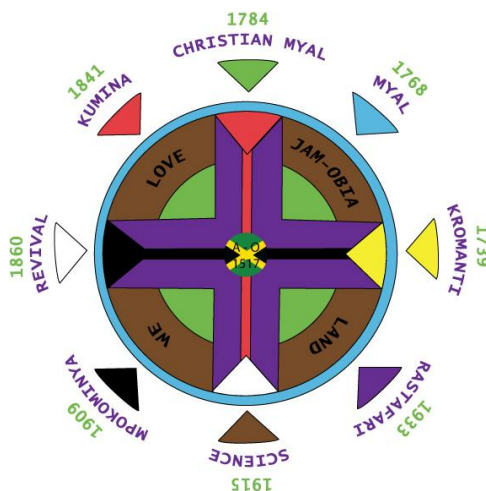
Rastafari would thus become a composite of all the previous denominations of the JOCC, rendering true the much quoted bible verse "all my springs [are] in thee" (Psalm 87 :7 KJV). Strongly influenced by the Ethiopianism which flourished in New York in the 1920s, as well as by Garvey, Howell would like de Laurence, plagiarize existing New Age texts to promote his message. *The Promised Key*, a fourteen page text outlining Rastafari theology, was the first indigenous Sacred Text of the Obia Catholic Church. It promoted death for mal-practicing Obia Doctors, and in appealing to the communal healing of the Myal Obia as well as its anti-establishment and pan-African ethos, it represented a form of neo-Myalism. Rastafari gave God a new name, in the same way that Myal gave Obia a new name. The Obia Catholic Church had fulfilled its mission of invulnerability against the white man through a "lexical spirituality" and an enduring Obia religiosity which, through eight recurring incarnations becomes a testament to the power of the doctor word *Obia* as healing, protection, knowledge, wisdom, will, mind and God. From its humble beginnings in the ghettos of Kingston, to the establishment of a worldwide following, Rastafari embodies the universal doctrine of a world without end.

The "bi" cognate symbolizing Wisdom, Knowledge and Spiritual Power becomes realized in the Binghi "reasonings" of the Rastafari Holy Assembly. Rastafari's emphasis on self-knowledge is an insistence that "Jah say we should know and not believe" (Marley,

“Ride Natty Ride”). “Who is dem dat I should be mindful of, when dem nuh know demself? Who is dem dat I should be mindful of, when dem nuh seek demself?” (Cappleton, “Mindful of”) asks the Rastafari Prophet. In this knowledge quest, Jamaican spiritualists have been cast as mad; but “they are not mad, they have the Spirit.” People understand that one learns Obia through Myal and thus “everybody [who seeks knowledge] is desperate for the Spirit.” Obia therefore evidences itself as a cognitive science, a science of the mind; JamAfrican Obia shows that “what makes gods simultaneously important and extraordinary is what they know and how much they know” (Tremelin 2006:113). As The Wisdom and Knowledge reveals Himself across time and space, He shows the evolutionary advantage of the human brain and the adaptive value of Spirit for each Obia denomination shows us the particular working of Spirit in changing historical circumstances. In its incorporation, unification and utilization of all knowledge, the Obia Mission identifies itself as a Catholic Mission because by so doing it affirms that “there is only one knowledge and that is knowledge” (Umeh 1999a: 263) the universal “Wisdom and Knowledge that Reveals Himself.”

CHAPTER 5

GNOSTIC OBIA:
AFRICAN SPIRITUOLOGY FROM CHUKWU ABIAMA TO JAH RASTAFARI



Is di secrecy around Obia dat give it a bad name. Obia is the Magic of the Secret Light. Obia is one and the same meaning as Myalism. Obia is ritual negotiation of invisible and visible forces. Obia is neutral mystical power. Obia is the process of healing/protection. Obia is a religious institution. Obia is related to the control or channeling of supernatural/spiritual forces. Obia is pharmacology and energy. Obia is divination. Obia is a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the Niger Delta, which simply means "Doctor." Obia is specialized religious knowledge reserved for the priesthood. Obia is Igbo name for a Dibia who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands. Knowledge and Wisdom are Holistic and so is Dibia. They have no end...

Defintional phrases⁴⁷

Chukwu welu O lu Dibia, "After God is Dibia." After God is the Obia man. The Igbo Ndibia established Obia Missions in Jamaica. These Obia Missions evolved into the JamAfrican Obia Catholic (JOCC) comprised of eight major denominations. The first Obia Missions were Healing Missions and every denomination of the JOCC is invested with a primary Duty to heal. Kumina, the most discrete of these Obia denominations, defines its Healing Ceremony as a Duty. Rastafari, the eighth denomination of the JOCC is essentially a congregation of Herbalists. These Herbalists congregate at Binghi Ceremonies where they

also use Reggae music to heal, even as they declare themselves a Holy Priesthood instituted for “The Healing of the Nations.” The Kromanti Play, Myal Dance, Revival Table, Kumina Duty, Rastafari Binghi are knowledge quest ceremonies which seek for possession by the Holy Spirit of Knowledge who provides healing or saving knowledge. Obia as revealed wisdom and knowledge belongs to the pan-human esoteric phenomenon of Gnosticism and Obia practitioners are rightly seen as Gnostic Revealers, occultists who provide saving knowledge. From *Chukwu Abiama* to Jah Rastafari, God as “the Wisdom and the Knowledge who reveals himself” has through his chosen vessel, the Obia practitioner, provided holistic healing to suffering humanity. In Jamaica, and the rest of the New World where the partially successful genocide of native populations necessitated Obia Missions; Obia missionaries were singled out, demonized and murdered, and their Missions outlawed. But the concentrated and unrelenting attack on Obia Missions and missionaries did not prevent the transfer of healing knowledge; nor did it prevent the establishment of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church.

The Spelling of Obia: Spiritology as Applied Anthropology

Melvin Rahming in addressing the “The Insistent Demands of Erna Brodber’s *Myal* notes the failure of literary scholars to “probe the spiritual matrix that spawns a reality in which spirit... [is] accepted not only as ‘possible’ but as real” (Rahming 2001:340). In taking the reality of Spirits as a given, and in privileging a spiritual worldview which defines everyday experience as religious phenomena, we submit to new rules of engagement with Obia and accordingly, we posit “a theory where issues of spirit and spirituality lose all vestiges of marginality and liminality” (Rahming 2001:340). We have gotten close to the *Psi*, close to the *Chi*, close to the *Ka*, close to *Obia* and can respond to the challenge of providing a “template for developing a

more comprehensive framework for understanding spirit phenomena as an important facet of religious experience” (Mageo and Howard 1996:5). We have taken into consideration what Mveng calls “anthropological poverty” - the desecrating of African’s being and essence; and as such, we advance a theory of Obia which “necessitate[s] the coining of new terms, the conceptualization of new epistemologies and new ontologies, and the framing of new methodologies” (Rahming 2001:340). Employment of the Igbo spelling of Obia is our performative writ in framing a theology of Obia which dispels the myths and falsehoods associated with this Africana religion.

One hundred years ago, before Africans started producing their own Obia scholarship, Sir Harry Johnston tells us that Obia is misspelt Obeah. Against the tide of anthropological poverty, Johnston posited that “Obia (misspelt Obeah) seems to be a variant or a corruption of an Efik or Ibo word from the Niger Delta, which simply means ‘Doctor’” (Johnston 1910:253). In his review of Johnston’s *The Negro in the New World*, W.E. Dubois cites Johnston as a singular white man, offering that “perhaps no white man has had so wide an acquaintance with Negro race under all its differing conditions” (Dubois 1912:547). Dubois commends Johnston for writing “on the color question with a certain fine breadth of view and lack of prejudice which is refreshing, even if unfashionable according to current American standards” (Ibid: 548). Johnston had much to recommend him. He was “British consul for Southern Nigeria and Portuguese East Africa, commissioner in Central Africa, consul general in Tunis and special commissioner in Uganda, and... had just completed an extensive tour in the Negro settlements in the western world” (Ibid:547). In the preface to the work, he states his honorable intentions: “I have tried to tell in words as well as pictures; the story of the NEGRO IN THE NEW WORLD, as much for my own education, as for that of

others” (Johnston 1910: v). Although Johnston sought to educate “others”, this important scholarship has largely been ignored by writers on Africana religion. Nonetheless, eighty-nine years later, we have confirmation of the etymology, spelling and meaning of the term Obia from an initiated Igbo Professor. Umeh informs us that the Igbo *Dibia* came to the Caribbean on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu*; and that “*Obia* man [is] spelt “obeah” by the English” (Umeh 1999b: 28).

Employment of the Igbo spelling of Obia recovers the principle of holistic healing denoted by the term. “*Obia*” is “Igbo name for a *Dibia* who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands” and “when an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Obia* or *Mbia Ogwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* profession in another land or society” (Umeh 1999b: 28). Recovery of the Igbo spelling at once privileges the Africana ideal of divine wisdom and knowledge; and in this invocation of the Igbo Great Spirit *Chi-Ukwu* or *Chukwu Abiama*, “the wisdom and knowledge that reveals himself,” we reject the English mis-spelling as the demonization of the Igbo God. We therefore posit a theory of Gnostic *Obia* which utilizes the Igbo spelling Obia to reference the Healing Missions exemplified in the eight denominations of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church. Alternately, the English mis-spelling Obeah is used to reference the mis-use of spiritual knowledge engendered by the brutal enslavement of Africans in the New World. Defining Obeah as Obia malpractice properly places the profanation of occult and sacred knowledge within the complex of the Obeah Factory described by Rastafari’s founder Leonard Howell.

Rastafarians reject the English language (and by extension aspects of Jamaican Creole) as incapable of expressing African culture and consciousness. Additionally, English is seen as a racist language which embodies, affirms and reinforces discrimination against

peoples of African descent. Further, English is seen as having inherent contradictions and negative vibrations particularly in orthography and phonology⁴⁸. “Rastafarians believe that a word can kill or cure and that every word carries a vibration. Every word has a history. Words should never be used unthinkingly” (Barrett 1985:289). Further, the Spelling of Obia is the employment of Hieroeidetic language. In using Hieroeidetic or mystical language, Occultists affirm the primacy of language or “The Word” as a distinctive human faculty. Within Rastafari linguistic ideology, the recovery of the original spelling of Obia is a form of *I-n-I-zation*: the transformation of existing words by phoneme replacement through the use of the affix “I” or “y. I-n-I-zation as linguistic practice expresses the concept of I-n-I which posits transcendental self-knowledge as a the three-fold relationship between the individual I (self), God (Jah Rastafar-I) and other Is (or selves). As a verbal art, Spelling is the use of a “*formula of sounds arranged to produce certain vibrations in co-relation with certain chords; the utilization of the natural magical power of sound energized by the Concentrated Will*” (Cassacanarie 1895:74). The history of the term in the West proves that O-B-I-A has a different vibrational energy from O-B-E-A-H, and the Spirit of Obia [Obeeyah] is different from that of Obeah [Obeyah]. “Jamaica” is also vibrational different from “JamAfrica” and accordingly, the coining and use of the term in this scholarship affirms the continental African foundations of New World Jamaica. As a written art, Spelling employs the mystical I-sight (eye-sight) which affirms the individual self as knowing, as autonomous and spiritual. For the Obia researcher, it represents a form of sympathetic empiricism, a means by which “to enter into and understand the phenomenon one is studying from inside out” (Versluis 2003: 31). The use of esoteric language will help the Obia scholar to “come to terms” with Obia, to arrive at a

radical appreciation of the fact that Spelling is a power; that words are Spirits and that the study of Spirit phenomena requires a different approach.

Spiritology defines a particular approach to the study of Spirit phenomena in the Modern Academy. It references interdisciplinary Spiritual Anthropology in which the researcher succumbs to transcendental experience, goes right inside his subject's subject and affirms for herself the Igboan aphorism, "whosoever pries into The Supreme Spirit will at the end find her Chi." This researcher produces a different kind of scholarship, becomes a Spiritual Anthropologist in the true sense for she has experienced the Spirit of Knowledge. Spiritology as methodology defines an approach aimed at proving that the researcher has gotten close to *psi* and has found out what it is; that she has not participated in kindly pretence; that she is not engaged in a series of putdowns. For the auto-ethnographer, the Spelling of Obia as a form of I-n-I-zation transcends the self/other dichotomy, revealing that *Ayi bu ofu*, "we are all one" meaning that "we all share in a unitary parentage of God" (Umeh 1997:244). This I-n-I-zation in Obia theology is a sacralization of the syllable "I"; this putting of the "I" in Obia, is nothing less than a form of cognitive linguistics. This dissertation proceeds on the orthographic, phonetic, morphemic and mystical force of Obia. It therefore constitutes a performative writ, an applied anthropology, a *Spiritology*, a distinctive approach to *Africana Spirituology*.

Gnostic Obia as Africana Spirituology

Obia is African *Spirituology* and African Spirituology is, in the language of the Revivalist, a "Spiritual Science." This "science of the Spirit," is in the Igboan conception a Science of the Holy Spirit of Knowledge, *Agwu* and in the JamAfrican Diaspora, the Myal that teaches Obia. *Nne Agwu* is the "Mother Holy Spirit, the Supreme Queen of society and

eternity and the ruler of everlastingness” (Umeh 1997:111). In her capacity as the ruler of language, knowledge or endlessness, “whoever is possessed by *Nne Agwu* is automatically given the knowledge...so he or she would perform the holistic *Dibia* work” (ibid). *Obia* or African Spirituology therefore defines continental and Diasporic African Knowledge Sciences or African Gnosticism. Within this conception, it is understood that “Spirituology” and “Knowledge Sciences” is esoteric tautology for the English term “Science” is actually derived from the Latin verb *scire*, to know; while the suffix “ology” references a particular branch of knowledge, knowledge being Spirit in the Occult theology. The Occultist de Laurence teaches that “Spirit means conscious will,” and further that “the word spirit and spirits is also used very often to signify invisible, but nevertheless substantial things – forms, shapes, and essences, elementals and elementaries, hades, ghosts, apparitions, angels and devils (de Laurence 1939:634). Spirit is therefore synonymous with Knowledge, Conscious Will, Faith, and Invisible Substantials -- all related to the Mind. Spirituology therefore references a Cognitive Science.

African Spirituology is an Occult Science. “Occultism is the science that deals with things that transcend sensual (material) perception...It deals especially with effects that cannot be explained by the universally known laws of Nature, but whose causes are still a mystery to those who have not penetrated deep enough into the secrets of Nature to understand them correctly. What may be occult to one person, may be fully comprehensible to another” (de Laurence 1939:634). *Obia* defines the ability to generate, manipulate and transform “Spirit” for the holistic healing. “Spirit” as conceived and experienced by African-derived religious practitioners is a triad of (1) knowledge or neutral mystical power. (2)

conscious will as human spiritual essences or souls, (3), invisible substantials or spiritual beings.

Scholars have generally argued that traditional “African spirituality is based on the notion of the Supreme God and a world of spirits between which and the physical world there is active continuity” (Gibbons 1995:67). In this conceptualization, the physical world is seen as a “manifestation of invisible presence and all experience interpretable as the language of intercourse between the two” (Gibbons 1995:67). I theorize therefore that African Spirituology is defined by

1. A theology or a system of thought concerned with or centered on “Spirit” defined as revealed Wisdom and Knowledge.
2. Branches of specialized knowledge regarding the creation, manifestation and transformation of “Spirit”. These branches are different types of intelligences as in military, herbal, musical, and biological; or as represented by the two-fold classification of arts and sciences.
3. “Spirit” or human cognition as the mediation between invisible God and visible man.
4. The techniques or expertise used to create, manifest and transform “Spirit”. The invocation of invisible substantials and the charging of inanimate objects are two such examples.
5. The techniques or expertise used to transform human life—to heal through “Spirit”. For example dancing for the Spirit and the use of entheogens.

Obia Spirituology is both belief and practice; both knowledge and expertise. The premium placed on Spirit as an immediate and effective force means that knowledge of as well as getting and maintaining access to this power is a persistent concern, and thus empowerment to access is seen in the frequent engagement in ritual discourse with divinities and ancestors—the host of spirits, and in the constancy of divine revelation. African Spirituology “derives its impetus from the ancestral heritage of African, its refinement from the bondage of slavery, and its continuing vitality from the conflict of the present” (Barrett 1974:2). African Spirituology represents a phenomenal approach to life and takes the human psyche seriously. As a conceptual vehicle, it helps us to better understand Obia as a form of

Gnosticism and as a catholic institution. The eight principal denominations of the JOCC symbolize the *Afa* Mystical O; it is a Medicine Wheel symbolizing *Obia*'s original designation as a Healing Mission.

Afa Mystical O and the Seal of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church

Afa is the ancient Igbo divination system and the *Afa* Mystical O is a single representation of the duality of Cosmic Consciousness verbalized in the First Word Om (female) and Om (male). The concept of “Om and Om” is the duality of *Akwu* – the female principle and *Obi* – the male principle. “*Akwu* is standstill, inactive, rest passive principle of the universe, female, negative. *Obi* is motion, active, positive, movement, male, activity principle of the universe” (Umeh 1999a:90). These basic dualities are further expressed in the concept of “Four Market Days” of *Eke, Oye, Afo and Nkwo* which in turn represent the four cardinal points. Igbo mystics acknowledge that “when something stands, something else stands beside it”; and accordingly, these four principal directions of the compass are complemented by four intermediary points, and together they symbolize the male and female principle, making for the mystical Eight or Infinity and thus symbolizing the “world without end.”

The JamAfrican Obia Wheel symbolizes the mystical *Isato/Asato* (8) in Igbo theological arithmetic which is the upright signification of the principle of Infinity; a representation the unity of the two worlds. These two worlds are both the world of human beings and the world of the Spirit as well as the world of males and the world of females. Accordingly, Eight is the number of the Divine Priesthood, the *ozo* titled person who “officiate[s] for the living and the dead in steadfastness, truth and justice” (Umeh 1997:36). This representation of the basic principles of life and death, spirit and human, male and

female, *okwu* (the holy period) and *ukpolo* (dangerous phase), is at once a symbol of the life cycle, a symbol of change; the Mystical O “contains what is, what was, and what will be” (Umeh 1999a:68). The *Afa* Mystical O as established in The Repeating Island of Jamaica therefore expresses itself as Benitez-Rojo explains as a “series of recurrences, of happenings, whose sole law is change” (Benitez-Rojo 1998:55). *Uwa na-ehughali/erughali ehughali/erughali*, “the world changes”; and this change is occasioned by the ceaseless interaction of the principles of *akwu* and *obi*, ensuring that “the only certainty about life is change” (Umeh 1999a:91).

This Mystical 8 is a pan-human symbol known cross-culturally The Sacred Hoop, The Eight-Circuit Brain, The Magic Circle, Mercury’s Wheel, and The Sun Dial among others. Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux offered that “everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles; and every tries to be round” (Neihardt 1972: 164). Alternately, the Igbo say that “*Ezi Okwu bu Ndu*, the truth is life” and, “*Ndu bu elegend Nge* life is a circle, and so, is one or unity” (Umeh 1999a:57). Among the Cherokee, the Mystical 8 is the symbol of “Grandmother Spider who brought the Sun.” The Igbos believe in eight cycles of reincarnation and eight planes of existence. This is expressed as *Uwa m asaa/Uwa m asato*; “My world seven/My world eight” (Umeh 1997:4) which is another representation of the “Four Market Days.” The JamAfrican Obia (Medicine) Wheel is as much a literal representation of the JamAfrican world as it is a symbolic one. It symbolizes a 445 year period of slavery and colonialism in Jamaica; from 1517 when the first Africans arrived to 1962 the year of independence. This 445⁴⁹ year period is the mystical “Four Market Days” and the “[JamAfrican] world in eight.” In its symbology of the four market days, the Medicine Wheel is also the Sacred Hoop of Oglala Lakǎóta Oyate (Oglala Sioux). It is the Sacred Cross,

“four-rayed herb, the daybreak-star herb of understanding” (Neihardt 1972:210) revered in a traditional Oglala Sioux prayer to The Great Spirit: “You who lived first and you who are older than all need, older than all prayer... You have set the powers of the four quarters to cross each other. The good road and the road of difficulties you have made to cross; and where they cross, the place is Holy” (Neihardt 1972: 232). Black Elk, the Oglala medicine man affirmed that these four quarters are four spirits, “but these four spirits are only one Spirit after all” (Neihardt 1972:2). In Igboan mysticism, the *Dibia* also affirms that “there is only one knowledge and that is knowledge” (Umeh 1999a:263).

The JamAfrican Obia Wheel is therefore a pan-human representation of the healing power of knowledge. It symbolizes mystical traditions from the continents of South America, North America, Europe, Asia and Africa, as well as the islands of the Caribbean. It bears the direct influence of ethnic African religions (namely Akan, Igbo, Congolese, Bini and Yoruba), Hindu Mysticism, Hebrew Kabbalah, and exoteric Christianity. Its physical form is a combination of the Afa Mystical O; the Eight Circuit Brain or *Aka Obi* “Mind of God” and the Sacred Hoop of the *Lakǎóta* Sioux. The word *Lakǎóta* means “feeling affection, friendly, united, allied” and in 1992, 500 years after Columbus’ voyage, the *Lakǎóta* Sioux held their fourth *Gathering of Eagles*. The location was in the Heart of Turtle Island, the Black Hills, near Custer, South Dakota. The gather had been foretold by a Dakota Elder some thirty years earlier. “Everybody was there” said DW, the Holy Man. “Jamaicans were there, other Caribbean people were, people were there from all over the world: everybody was there, and everybody came and built the Medicine Wheel with rocks that came from everywhere.” The Medicine Man Chauncey Dupree had a special work to do; he had gotten a vision of how to fix the broken Sacred Hoop that had so distressed his clansman Black Elk. “There was a

color missing from the Wheel. It was the Brown. The communication was broken, the Wheel was broken and the Brown fixed it” said DW, whom the ancestors had commissioned him to help “fix it.” The ancestors had also commissioned him to design the Seal of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church. As I sat before him and told him why I had come, DW quietly drew Chauncey’s Medicine Wheel. He took my notes with my unfinished drawing quite literally overlay it on Chauncey’s Wheel. I said to him “they have given me these colors for the different denominations, but I am supposed to do something with the purple, I don’t know what it is.” He replied “it’s the color of the cross; it’s to go inside the cross.” With that sentence, he selected a particular shade of purple, took the purple crayon and colored the Cross. In less than ten minutes, the Seal was completed.

A full discourse on the mystical dimensions of Seal of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church is beyond the scope of this work. In its most basic associations, the Eight denominations represent a period of 194 years from Kromanti Obia 1739 to Jah Rastafari Obia 1933. Mystically, 194 is the number fourteen (14) the emblem of Temperance or Equilibrium. It is the also the number of maturity/puberty and balance. Five as the sum of fourteen is the number of Man, the sacred pentagram with 5 extremities of head, two hand and two feet. The north-south dividing line known as the Kalûnga Line in Bakongo separates the pre and post emancipation periods. The east-west Line of God is the proverbial “straight and narrow” road which joins the exoteric and esoteric aspects of the Hebrew/Christian religious tradition even as it separates traditions with distinctively African deities from creolized denominations. In this sense Kumina is seen as a part of the Myal tradition. In the Congolese tradition, JamAfrica’s “Four Moments in the Sun” going from East to South are Kromanti, Christian Myal, Revival and Science Obia. These Critical Moments signal the establishment of

a new phase of religious consciousness by the incorporation of Hebrew exoteric and esoteric traditions as well Hindu mysticism in the case of Science.

At the most basic level the color symbolism of the Four Wheels speaks to the dialectic of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church. The center circle is the Jamaican Flag. Traditional interpretations of the colors is phrased as “hardships (Black) there are, but behold the sun (yellow) shineth and the grass is green.” The second is green representing contradictory omen of Christian Myalism. The third circle bears the color brown, the same as Science Obia. This Brown represents the missing link which fixes the broken communication. Science means knowledge and this Obia denomination represents all the traditions that have gone before. It represents the final phase of Wisdom building her house and is symbolic of multi-racial diversity of peoples making up New World. These brown people are the products of the cultural mixing which defines the New World. Their inclusion as the Third Eye of the Wheel speaks to the possibility of peace which can be achieved when these brown peoples accept their multiracial lineage, denying no part of themselves and accepting the dignity, equality and divinity of all peoples. It is then that the peace symbolized by the final blue circle will be achieved. This is the peace of pan-humanism promised by Myal Obia practitioners who sought for a “society open to all.” It is the Fourth Eye and it encloses the Wheel, emphasizing the fact that these circles are but one circle of Love. Rastafari Obia is symbolized by the royal purple. It is the color of the equal armed cross which dominates the Wheel. These associations affirm Rastafari as “The Promised Key” which unlocks the gates to knowledge and equates *Chukwu Abiama* with Jah Rastafari through the theology of the human being as an embodiment of divine knowledge and wisdom.

As JamAfricans utilize their World Wide Spider Web of Eight Knowledges, they affirm a legacy of Sciences which posits that “no one goes to house of the Spider to teach it wisdom.” It is understood that man “man turns in the path, He merely turns in the path; the priests, the same.” JamAfrican spiritualists “turn you roll” – going right in a “counteraction ritual” of change; working for knowledge; trying ceaselessly to achieve a good name in the four market days allotted to them. The Igbo asserts *Afia ka ayi bialu n 'uwa/Afa ka a na-acho n' enu/Azuta afia ma azutaghi afia/Oge zue amanaghi naba* “We are here on market attendance/ Good name is what we are pursuing/ Whether this objective is achieved or not/When the time is up we must go back home” (Umeh 1999b:17). For the descendants of enslaved Africans the pursuit of a good name continues to be a formidable task; yet the saints “press along” knowing that “the hotter the battle, the sweeter the victory.” They soldier on, “turning their roll”, aiming for better and, against all odds, achieving good, where goodness is impossible.

The Betta Dan Syndrome and the Impossibility of Good

The upside down Obeah Factory is premised on the accepted belief that “anything (too) black nuh good.” Achieving a good name is virtually impossible because the term “African”, like “Native American”, became a bad word in the New World. The cognitive terrorism of the slave and colonial eras has created such an existential crisis that Blacks – the term for Africans in the Diaspora, often perceive themselves as “tragically Black.” Accordingly, they often accept that it is “impossible to be good” because “everywhere yuh turn macka juck yuh” and so “everybody waan turn Massa” [everyone wants to be a white slave master]. I use the phrase “Impossibility of Good” as a conceptual vehicle for this ongoing existential crisis, and thus hope to provide a means of overcoming it. As noted before, the backdrop to this grave situation is the exchange of Òfó for whip, the trading of

traditional values for capitalistic ideals where the ability to oppress made one a better person. Oppression and misery rather than freedom and happiness became the means by which a person elevated himself over his brother. This psychology of “Betterment” I define as the “Betta Dan Syndrome”.

The foregoing discourse on the Obia Paradox and Obia’s Strange Career shows that there is ambivalence toward “things African” such things being both cultural and biological. Christian piety, the path to purity, is set up against African religiosity, the diabolic evil and hence becoming pure is a cultural obsession. No one who has sojourned in Jamaica for any length of time can help but notice the average Jamaican’s preoccupation with purity and cleanness. In local parlance “hands a fi clean, heart a fi pure.” This purity concept is part of a worldview which advocates goodness as the foundation of social unity/solidarity and individual success and happiness. Indeed “one good turn deserves another” and “good begets good”- “bowl go packie come” and this spiritual dimensions reciprocity of goodness is expressed in the Jamaican folksong “Walk Good.”

Lyrically, “walk good on yuh way and good duppy walk wid yuh” as aphorism and philosophy advocates goodness as a way of life. “Every day on your way walk good, [and] good [Will] follow you, if you just walk good.” Goodness in this sense is “righteous living”- the absence of anti-social behavior epitomized in greed, envy, jealousy...the seven deadly sins. Yet these are matters of the heart, matters of *Obi*; all of this “heart talk” is Obia discourse. “Dog heart” and “wicked heart” describes the bad person who lacks control over his emotions/self and causes misfortune for himself and others. “Lion heart” on the other hand, symbolizes the impulse to love, bravery and the championing of ill-Will. Framed in another folk song it expresses the universal concept of One Love: “fi mi love have lion heart,

strong and everlasting.” Having a clean heart, pure heart and lion heart (brave heart) is the good person who seeks continually for self-mastery and social unity. The continued salience of this worldview and its ubiquitous presence as expressed in all JamAfrican religions and in the popular culture evidences the enduring complexity and paradox of defining goodness and the impossibility of being good in a post-slavery society.

Every phase of the European Slave Trade and every aspect of the slave system in the Americas challenged traditional notions of good and evil. For indeed, how can one be good when one is forced to exist in a system where “when yuh a fi get some food your brother has to be your enemy” (Marley, “Ambush in the Night”) and where one’s religion is considered a “wicked art,” and adherents are said to be in league with the “Evil One?” In the evil capitalistic enterprise of slavery, the communitarian worldview is unworkable and hence the preservation of social order which underlies traditional African conceptions of goodness is the first casualty in a society founded on a philosophy of divide and rule, and one geared toward the oppression of Africans. The spiritual terror and brutality of European slavery and the effects of a protracted neo-colonialism continues to produce nuff “sufferation” in Jamaica. Indeed, Jamaica is probably the one place in the world where there exists the social category of “sufferer.” These self-proclaimed “sufferers” the hopelessly poor move about the country, “criminally prone” and “begging a bly” from people considered “betta dan dem.” The suffering caused by slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism leads to a preoccupation with “the impossibility of goodness.”

I have already described the advent of the Obeah Factory – an uncivil society that made “goodness impossible” and hence exacerbated personal and ethnic strife creating an unhealthy and often deadly preoccupation with the malicious use of neutral mystical power.

It is instructive that Rastafari would come to define the capitalist regime in spiritual terms declaring that “di Babylon system is a vampire sucking di blood of the sufferer, di Babylon system is a vampire killing di children day by day” (Marley “Babylon System”). It is not a coincidence, that this system would be “building church and university [and] deceiving the people continually”, that it would be “graduating thieves and murderers” as it “sucks the blood of the sufferers”. It is impossible to enunciate to non-Jamaicans the equal love and contempt which Jamaicans have for each other, and the suspicion inherent in every encounter as people try to prove that they are better than each other. This “Betta Dan Syndrome” is the post-traumatic distress syndrome occasioned by a post-slavery society still struggling to stand on its feet in the evil days of neo-colonialism. The “Betta Dan Syndrome” is as endemic as it is nauseating. “Every baddy waan tun massa” and generally, one person finds a reason to belittle or level the other person be it stranger, family or friend. The catastrophic level of boasting, pretense, contempt and “tear down” is a madness equaled only by its cathartic release in the indigenous Reggae music and unrestrained spiritual and physical violence for which Jamaica is known. In Jamaica, the paradoxical coexistence of a high level of corruption and violence and a record for the most churches per square mile is a “contradictory omen” which proves to be nothing short of the eternal quest for equilibrium and balance; an unquenched thirst for equal “rites” and justice.

The prevalence of Obia, more than two hundred years after its criminalization, serves as a critique of the continuing injustice of the capitalist system. It is indeed ironic that Obia -- an outlawed practice, continues to provide medical, legal and social services to a needy population. Obia Missionaries operated on traditional African values of truth, justice and fairness; they were considered to be emissaries of God. With their “potent mouth”, “potent

hands” and “four eyes” conferred by the Holy Spirit of Knowledge, they could be relied upon to execute justice on all occasions. It was expected that in their commitment to the ethics of *Dibia*, they would avoid “double dealing” in order not to “detract from their spiritual holiness and cleanliness of their hands[,] so that when they show their open palms to the Most High One in silent or speechless prayers of the last resort, success is guaranteed” (Umeh 1997:87-88). Obia Missionaries subscribe to an African worldview which advocates that crimes are first communal before they are individual. According to Fu-Kiau, “in the Western concept the individual seems to be responsible for the crime. He is either conscious or unconscious of it; it is only committed by him... [but] crimes are not individual acts, they are, in many cases, earlier social creations” (Fu-Kiau 2001:73). As such, a society founded on a crime against humanity, inherently bears within it proneness to criminality. Further, a society that criminalizes the religion of one ethnic group immediately classifies its members as criminals.

The Plantation System then which willfully murdered hundreds of thousands of Africans and which criminalized and demonized (among other things) their human right to religion must be prepared to suffer the consequences of this “original sin.” Offering that “societies and systems prepare their own foes and their own underminers,” Fu-Kiau notes further, “crimes are found within social and cultural patterns; in the food and in the way a society eats that food; in its taboos; in its language, and the vocabulary used to communicate concepts, ideas, and values; in the way alien cultures are interpreted, and in the way social, cultural and ideological discrepancies are understood” (Fu-Kiau 2001: 73). Obia practitioners across the Caribbean understand this, they understand the cycle of poverty, violence which dominates lower classes, and the psychological damage which produces myriad acts of criminality among the so-called upper classes. Criminality is a problem in Jamaica: the murder

rate is high, corruption is culture and there is a great disparity in income between rich and poor. Jamaican spiritualists know that “the repetition of a criminal act shows how bad the system is... [and that] when a crime is committed, judgment should not only be passed on to the criminal, but also on the entire community in which the crime found its roots” (Fu-Kiau 2001:74).

The endemic violence in Jamaica is properly seen as part and parcel of the unrelenting effects of *Ichu Ochuchu*, punitive sacrifice or punitive justice. It relates to the justifiable punishment of those who commit abominations. In its perversion, it is the “send back blow” of JamAfrican Spiritual warfare administered by Science Obia men at exorbitant fees. The Obeah Factory caused the “death of *Nne Ebele*, the Mother of Mercy. Accordingly, the principle of *Ogu*, forgiveness or forbearance which dictates the forgiveness of transgression to the proverbial “two times two” became lost. Instead of allowing a person four *Ogus*; four acts of forgiveness, enslaved Africans and their descendants operate on the maxim *Nne Ebele anwukwaana/Onye mekwo m/Mmegwalu ya*: The Mother of Mercy has died/Whoever acts against me/ I will strike back in retaliation” (Umeh 1997a:257). *Òfó na Ogu*, truth and forgiveness go together and the application of the Whip instead of the principles of *Òfó and Ogu* leads to numerous abominations among which is the tendency of the Science Obia man to “kill ina bungle.” Indeed, this unhappy circumstance explains what all dis Obeah is for. Jamaica’s reputation as the “murder capital of the world” attests to the fact that “when an evil deed or abomination is left unredressed for a year; it turns into a vengeance that has become rooted on the land” (Umeh 1999a:254). It is some 355 years since the 1655 British invasion of Jamaica. The Jamaican society is mired in corruption and exploding with

violence. Outside of the balmyaads and the One Love Assemblies of Rastafari; few people are willing to forgive themselves, their neighbors, their ancestors and the White enslavers.

The belief that the community bears the crime committed by the individual means that every Courthouse battle won by Spiritual means is a “resisting of the system.” “Weh a man fi do, im haffi live!” is one cultural refrain. Spiritualists across Jamaica often empathize with clients, who in their eyes could not help committing the crimes. They understand also that in a society which engenders “nuff Obeah working” the convicted are often not responsible for their behavior. In other words, in the Obeah Factory, people’s behavior is often “set”-- as in “dem set im fi tief”; and people “yeye can turn” both by the cycle of unemployment, poverty and violence as well the powers of the Obia man. Crimes as rituals of poverty and oppression are not always excusable, but they are explainable; and for many Obia Doctors most are forgivable. The Obia practitioner provides knowledge in the face of ignorance, health where there is disease, courage to combat fear and hope to temper despair. These “Obi Negroes” are expert charmers and calmers.

In the upside down Obeah Factory, the “calmers” are said to “work the spirit”, while the “charmers” are known to “work Obeah.” These designations reflect the principles of *Akwu* and *Obi* because it is the women who calm or heal through Mothering, while the men charm or harm through Spelling. Calming and harming are not discrete categories, but they represent general dual manipulation of neutral mystical power for good (Good/God Will) or evil (Ill/Devil Will). The employment of the Spiritual Sciences by a perverse will for evil purposes is Obia malpractice. This is the unqualified mis-use of spiritual force constituting “one of the most terrible dangers of human life” (Levi 1910:131) known as bewitchment – “the act of enveloping someone...in a formulated will” (Ibid: 133). Levi casts it as a

“homicide, and the more infamous because it eludes self-defence by the victim and punishment by law” (Ibid: 131). One can therefore understand the extreme fear, awe, disgust and respect that Jamaicans have for Obia. The average person, unless armed, is defenseless against formulated ill-Will manifested in the “bad mind and tear down”, jealousy, gluttony, envy, hate, slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, linguistic imperialism and the legion of other deadly sins exacerbated by the unchecked march of capitalism.

Evans-Pritchard’s classic work *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* bears the marks of extensive research into the spirit world of the Azande. The work is important not only for cataloguing the difference between *Mangu* (“witchcraft”) and sorcery but for presenting cultural mores relating to the punishment of these organic impulses. A brief exposition of Azande witchcraft beliefs may help us better understand JamAfrican Obia. Evans-Pritchard’s description of witchcraft is similar to Cassecanarie’s rendering of Obia and to de Laurence’s definition of Magic: “A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act” (1976: 21). Witchcraft is defined as an organic quality and “the Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality...Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers. Against both they employ diviners, oracles, and medicines” (ibid). Witchcraft is considered organic in two senses: 1) It is due to witchcraft-substance located in the body of witches; and it is inherited, being passed on from mother to daughter and from father to son. 2) It arises from natural human relations and may be operative or inoperative. In this sense, a person may have witchcraft substance in his body but it is “cool”, which means that he is not using it. Importantly, the logical imputation of witchcraft inheritance in terms of kinship is not present among the Azande. If a person is a witch, it does not follow that the entire clan

will be witches. Instead, witchcraft is regarded generally “as an individual trait and it is treated as such in spite of its association with kinship” (Ibid: 25).

Witchcraft “activation” or operation as resulting from human relations means that “a man never asks the oracles...whether a certain man is a witch. He asks whether at the moment this man is bewitching him” (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 25). In seeking to understand the cause of his affliction as rooted in human relations then, “one attempts to discover whether a man is bewitching some one in particular circumstances and not whether he is born a witch” (ibid). It stands to reason therefore that if it is confirmed by the oracle that a man is inflicting harm at this particular time, one can be certain that he is a witch. However, in the absence of this confirmation “you do not know whether he is a witch or not and have no interest in the matter” (ibid). Among the Azande, the individual is “interested in witchcraft only as an agent on definite occasions and in relation to his own interests, and not as a permanent condition of individuals” (Ibid: 26). Accordingly, small misfortunes resulting from witchcraft are generally overlooked, and only in the case of death or constant and/or persistent oracular exposure is a person considered a confirmed witch. The reparations made by witches for causing death is generally a private affair, and the extracting of vengeance for the death of a clan member relates to the cleansing of abomination rather than the result of anger and hatred. Extracting vengeance is a means of fulfilling a pious duty as well as a source of profit. Once the requisite duties have been fulfilled, there is generally no hostility between the compensating kin and the kin of the deceased. Further, the wider social network is uninvolved and unconcerned about what is considered a personal matter.

Aboro kikpa, “men of the gall-bladder” are related but distinct from *mangu*. Like witches, *aboro kikpa* contain within their bodies an organic substance, in this case, an

exceptionally large gallbladder, which causes them to inflict harm. “It is believed that the gall-bladder in some persons is exceptional in size, giving rise to marked psychological traits. Spiteful and resentful and ill-tempered persons come into this category” (Evans-Pritchard 1976:29). Persons known as *aboro kikpa* “‘brood over things’ and are loath to make up a quarrel, being little ready to forgive those who have offended them” (ibid). Importantly, “everybody is a gall-bladder man in the sense that everybody possesses a gall-bladder, but in some men it is more pronounced than in others” (ibid: 29-30). Although variably described, witchcraft substance is found in the same general area as the gall-bladder. It is said to be 1) “attached to the edge of the liver,” 2) “the small intestine in certain digestive periods,” and 3) “several centimeters long and is found near the liver or gall-bladder” (Evans-Pritchard 1976:22). The distinction between these two organic forms of causing illness lies in the fact that “a gall-bladder man and a witch both display the same dispositions, but only a witch can translate these dispositions into serious injuries” (ibid:30). What this means in effect, is that a *mangu* can cause harm simply by willing it; whereas *aboro kikpa* must resort to the use of bad medicines to manifest or effect his or her feelings of ill-will. These bad medicines are generally produced by a sorcerer.

What we have among the Azande is an acceptance that organic human relations have an effect on the human body and psyche. Feelings of ill-will and good will are natural responses to one’s environment, and each produce particular results when activated. Unlike good will, activated ill-will produces undesirable results which negatively impact the individual and community. “One knows a witch by his red eyes” says the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1976:23). This concept of the “red-eye” (Jamaican “red-yeye”) or evil has cross cultural associations. Equally important is the cross cultural associations of the

stomach/gut/small intestine/liver with wrath, jealousy, anger, enviousness and bitterness. In Jamaica parlance, to be resentful, envious and/or jealous of someone is “to have [them] up ina yuh craw,” or “to have [them] up ina yuh stomach.” The cross cultural associations may be seen in the English phrase “stick in (one's) craw” which means “to cause one to feel abiding discontent and resentment.” In English, the “craw” is the stomach of an animal while among the Akan of Ghana “kra” means soul. Elisa Sobo's *One Blood: The Jamaican Body* (1993) documents the preoccupation of Jamaicans with the stomach or “belly”. It may be safely theorized that the Jamaican phrase is in every sense a Creole one indicative of the transculturation which Obeahed *Obia*. Within certain contexts, people's hearts are prone to “rise-up against each other” and people will “cut-eye, “cut-eye pon each other”; and if they are witches, use their very looks to kill. The hostile slave environment created a multitude of occasions for “people's heart to rise up”; for people to “hate each other mortally.” This context of “divide and conquer” activated organic ill-will to epidemic proportions, drastically increasing psychic acts resulting in “wanga gut” and tendencies to be “bitter like bitter gall”; and ““carry belly’ fi people.” It is this legion of ill-will that continues to the present day, and it is this legion of ill-will against which the *Dibia* employed his leechcraft with measured success.

Leechcraft or the art of healing was the job of the *Dibia* who came to Jamaica on *Obia*. Like *aboro kikpa* and witches, *Dibia* is an organic attribute. However, instead of having an innate tendency to ill-will, the *Dibia* is the embodiment of good will; he “represents all that is good” (Alutu 1985: 91). The *Dibia* as organic good will is encapsulated in the Igbo aphorism, *Dibia di n'ahu* meaning “*Dibia* is in the body” (Umeh 1997:81). This means that the *Dibia* is characterized by his spiritual and physical make up; that he is born with the special

abilities and faculties. While cross-culturally, the stomach is designated the primary seat of ill-will; goodwill is found in the Holy Trinity of the eyes, the mouth and the hands. Among the Igbo these are known as:

1. *Ifu uzu* (seeing beyond the ordinary);
2. *Aka ite* (potent hand) with which such feats as the healing touch is effected and *ogwu* created;
3. *Onu Atu* (literally, potent mouth but in actuality the Divine Mouth of the Igbo ancients' creator God *Atu* (i.e., *Atum* in ancient Egypt).

The Igbo saying *Onu Dibia bu Onu Mmuo*, "The mouth of the *Dibia* is the Mouth of the Spirit," shows the primacy of the Word to holistic healing. The *Dibia* is known alternately as "*Obala Otule*" which means "Speaker for the God of Light or *Atu* (*Atum*) or the Holy Spirit *Agwu*" (Umeh 1997:81) and the title references the *Dibia's* ability to speak things into being with his "potent mouth." With this "potent mouth," the *Dibia* becomes the proverbial psychotherapist, employing wit and wisdom in the diffusion of ill-will while at the same "seeing beyond the ordinary" and using his healing hands to effect healing. The *Dibia* knows that "everybody is a gall-bladder man" so he seeks to reduce the circumstances that will inflate the gall-bladder. Through invocation of The Mother of Mercy, he encourages *Òfó na Ogu*, truth and forgiveness, knowing that those who persist in evil thoughts and evil deeds will eventually suffer the consequences.

"Evil will lay wait its perpetrator" while "good will wait for its generator" because "nothing is lost in the Cosmic Consciousness and Being" (Umeh 1999a:57). Leonard Percival Howell in declaring Rastafari as "The Promised Key" states that "it is the will of H. M. Ras Tafari that such persons of good will may have an opportunity to get knowledge of truth" (Howell 2001:21). As a Priesthood of the "Royal Order of King Ras Tafari the King of Kings of Ethiopia" (ibid), Rastafari Obia is properly placed within the tradition of the *Eze Nri* or Sacred

King of Igboland; and In Igboland, no *Eze Nri* is “coronated or accepted until he has gone to Omambala Sacred River and gets *Udu-naano* the sacred four-eyed *Udu* [pot] from the bottom of the sacred River” (Umeh 1999a:63). Four Market Days; Four Moments; Four Spirits and Four Eyes conceptualize the 20/20 vision of the Knower. From the establishment of Kromantia Obia in 1739, Good Will had to wait six and a half generations, some 194 years, until 1933 when the “four-eye Science man” Howell would provide the mystical keys of Knowledge to a starving and ignorant population. He would establish a 20th century Obia Mission at Pinnacle and wage war on the “black and white heart Obeah Factory” in which fallen Angels wreak havoc with their “deadly poisonous indomitable lying tongue[s]” (Howell 2001:13). Howell’s I-sight would prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that “one sees the Spirit through the eyes of the *Dibia*” (Umeh 1997:137).

Four Eyes for The Journey:
The Obic Christ and The Mystic Revelation of Rastafari

The founding of Rastafari is properly seen as the Obia Mission of the 20th century. In the establishment of The Pinnacle Balmyaad in Sligoville St. Catherine and in his use of the Holy Herb; Howell, in the tradition of the Myalists aimed for a “society open to all” that would provide invulnerability against the white colonial government and therefore effect the healing of the African nations. In the formation of a communal theocracy at Pinnacle he sought to provide *Ogwu*, self knowledge and love as the ultimate solution to Jamaican Blacks. At Pinnacle, he sought to govern by the dictates that *Òfó* – Truth; *Ogu* –Justice and Forgiveness and *Alo* – Responsibility; Howell insisted on the divinity of each person and on the sacred power of *Fa* – the Word:

Let this be our goal, forward to the King of Kings must be the cry of our social hope. Forward to the King of Kings to purify our social standards and our way

of living, and rebuild and inspire our character. Forward to the King of Kings to learn the worth of manhood and womanhood. Forward to the King of Kings to learn His code of Laws from the mount demanding absolute Love, Purity, Honesty, and Truthfulness. Forward to the King of Kings to learn His Laws and social order, so that virtue will eventually gain the victory over body and soul and that truth will drive away falsehood and fraud. (Howell 2001:7)

This litany is an appeal to *òménàlà*, the traditional values lost in the creation and maintenance of the Obeah Factory. Rastafari espouses a theology grounded in “absolute Love, Purity, Honesty, and Truthfulness.” At the mystical level, Rastafari is the eighth denomination of the JOCC and the Igbo’s believe that “*ife lie isaa o naa*,” literally, “whatever ‘eats’ seven goes” (Umeh 1999a:91). As the South West Point of the Medicine Wheel, Rastafari is the “Uprising” for the “downpression” resulting from the capitalist enterprise. By and large, the founding father’s message has been misunderstood by both Rastafari believers and non-believers. The contemporary demonization of Obia by Rastafari brethren constitutes, as Bilby suggests, “an (un)natural mystic blowing through the air.” But if we listen carefully, we will hear that the founding father of Rastafari did not reject Gnostic Healing Principle of Obia, he denounced the Upside Down Obeah Factory created by ruthless capitalists. This is The Mystic Revelation of Rastafari.

“New Name Jah Got and We Call Him Rastafari, Heathen no like Jah Name/ It’s a New Name, A Precious Name, New Name Rastafari.” These are the opening lines of one of the many Rastafari hymns which invoke His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia and Elect of God as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Also known as “The Lion of Judah” and “The Light of this World”, His Imperial Majesty was deified by Leonard Percival Howell and “The Living God” who both symbolized and exemplified the divinity of all Africans, and all righteous peoples. “His Majesty Ras Tafari is the head over all man for he is the Supreme God. His body is the fullness of him that fillet

all in all” (Howell 2001:7). While the foregoing statement is rightly interpreted as an affirmation of the divinity of His Imperial Majesty; it may be seen as a prophetic statement about the mythological legacy of Rastafari. Howell began preaching the divinity of His Imperial Majesty around January 1933, some two years and two months after Haile Sellassie’s Coronation in November 1930. *The Promised Key* is presumed to have been written in 1935, the year of the Italian invasion (Spencer 1998). After returning from exile in 1941, His Imperial Majesty was deposed in a military coup led by Mengistu in 1974. He died on August 27th 1975 while under arrest at the age of 83. At the time of his death, he had been deified for some 41 years. The missing body of this direct descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba became an important part of Rastafari theology.

In the eyes of Rastafari believers His Imperial Majesty’s Divine lineage as well as his pan-Africanism is ample proof of his Christfulness. But it was the Italian invasion, his six year exile, overthrow and subsequent death which confirms him as the Obic Christ. At the time of Mussoloni’s invasion, Ethiopia was the oldest Monarchy in the world and the attack on Ethiopia was seen as an attempt the dismantle Africa’s royal legacy. Haile Selassie’s June 1936 address to the League of Nations is one of the Sacred Texts of Rastafari. The speech is immortalized in Marley’s “War”: “Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior/is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned/everywhere is war.” When The Emperor’s death was publicized in the absence of a corpse, Rastafari believers insisted that he was not dead and this became the theme of numerous Rastafari songs. “Dem say Selassie dead and dem caan show we the tomb” [They say Selassie is dead, yet they cannot show us his tomb], goes one popular song. By the time the Emperor’s remains were found in 1992 beneath a toilet in the Imperial Palace, fifty-nine years had passed since

the advent of Rastafari religion which now boasted a worldwide following. The mystical dimensions of The Emperor's interment below the Royal Toilet is beyond the scope of the text, except to say that if one were to in popular fashion exclaim "Holy Shit!" upon hearing of this occurrence, one would have uttered one of the Praise Names of Rastafari. By the 5th of November, 2000 when his body was interred in the Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, the Rastafari brethren who attended the funeral could declare in similar fashion to that of Jesus' disciples: "he is not here, for he is risen" (Matthew 28:6 KJV). For indeed Ras Tafari was alive and well in the hearts of those who held to the Occult doctrine of Death as transformation and who identified The Emperor's speech to the League of Nations with Jesus' message of brotherhood, love and equality.

Selassie I "is the Chapel" and Jesus preached that "the temple of God... the Spirit of God dwelleth in you" (1 Corinthians 3:16 KJV). Jesus' denouncement of materialism as well as his emphasis on self-knowledge would become part of Rastafari theology. In the same manner that the Greeks identified Jesus as the Orphic Christ and the New Song, Rastafari brethren; made His Imperial Majesty the Obic Christ and New Song of Africans in exile. "By the rivers of Babylon/where we sat down and there we wept/ when we remembered Zion/For the wicked carried us away captivity required of us a song/How shall we sing King Al-FA song in a strange land?" It was impossible to sing the old songs, so Rastafari opted for a New Song, in a new language of Freedom. "New Name Jah Got and We Call Him Rastafari" sings the new song of the eighth Obia denomination. Rastafari's triumphant march in this One Love generation speaks to the salience of the message of interracial unity and divine self-knowledge.

And yet many whose eyes have not beheld the fullness of Rastafari continue to denounce it. They understand not that this New Song is but an Old Song, “the old old story of Jesus and his love” and that the “old old story of Jesus and his love” is but the older old story of the “ancient of days” known to the Igbos *Chukwu Abiama*. “Jesus said unto them, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am’” (John 8:58 KJV). In exploring “Gnosis before Christ,” David Fideler in *Jesus Christ, Sun of God: Ancient Cosmology and Early Christian Symbolism*, offers that “the idea of Gnosis, and the corresponding figure of the Gnostic Revealer, is not unique to Christianity” (1993: 132). This seminal work which looks at the Greek foundations of Christianity casts Jesus as “The Orphic Christ and the ‘New Song’ of Christianity” (ibid: 171). This account of the mythical figure of Jesus bears a striking resemblance to the advent and theology of Rastafari. In Eleanor Wint’s scholarship which records “His Imperial Majesty in Rasta Voices,” Ras Boanerges affirms that when one looks at the evidence, “Haile Selassie seems as unique as Iyesus (Jesus) in every way” (Wint 1998:163). The demonizing voices of those without knowledge of this mysticism, constitutes an “(un)natural mystic blowing through the air.”

There is an (un)natural mystic blowing through the air and with the preponderance of *Ofeke* “ninety-five out of every one hundred do not know what they do or say [,] any ghost can fool them at any corner” (Howell 2001:13). It is time to take four eyes for a journey into Rastafari’s Sacred Text *The Promised Key* with focused attention on four major Keys pertinent to the Obia discourse: Key 5: The Healing, Key 6: Balm Yard, Key 7: Royal Notice and Key 8: How to Fast. Throughout the entire text “Obeah” is rendered in completely negative terms: “obeah factory”; “guilty of obeah”, “obeah dogs”; “obeah self”, and “obeah shop”. The “obeah shop” is contrasted with “Holy Place” of the “Balm Yard” “that is wholly

consecrated to God almighty for the cleansing and healing of the nations” (ibid:10); in other words, the Obeah Shop is contrasted with the Obia Mission. Key Seven gives Royal Notice to the reigning King of England: “Science[.] My dear King [George V], your black and white heart obeah factory is upside down” (ibid: 11). The word “Science” in this cryptic phrase is rightly interpreted as Knowledge or neutral mystical power. It is a *double-entendre* that at once exposes the double-edged sword of spiritual knowledge; its ability to liberate as well as its ability to corrupt. The color of Obi, the heart is unnatural, it is black and white. Here Howell references the racialization of species which renders white superior to blacks and hence denies the sameness/oneness of a red-blooded human heart. It is this discoloration of the heart indicative of disease and disorder which disrupts the natural order, turning everything upside down; and transplanting the Obia Mission, the Temple of God with an Obeah Factory, An Evil Mission - an unholy building which manufactures ignorance and wickedness.

The Royal Notice is from one monarchy to another and Howell wants King George to Know that he is a Scientist, that he Howell Knows what is happening. The Notice is therefore a threat to the social dis-order, a vow to return things to their rightful positions, to spin the Medicine Wheel and turn things “upside down”. Howell is making sure that the King knows that Kings of Kings is equally powerful because as Black Elk affirmed “it is from understanding that power comes...for nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves” (Neihardt 1972: 180). Howell’s equivocal statement is also an admission of the corrupting influence of occult knowledge for it is Science -- de Laurence Science, Rastafari’s direct ancestor which engendered the wholesale commodification of the sacred; thus preserving the status quo. This

commodification of mystical knowledge is seen in the prevalence of Obeah Shops which trade in the evil and ignorance produced by the Obeah Factory. Howell therefore gives further notice that “A Balm yard is not a Hospital neither is it a obeah shop” (Howell 2001: 11); for the Western Hospital like the capitalist Obeah Shop traffics in the medical sciences. He differentiates Revival Obia practitioners from commoners: “Bands are not [run] by Ministers, they are [run] by the Priesthood... after the Royal Order of King Ras Tafari the King of Kings of Ethiopia. Revivalists are not commoners... King Alpha’s work is strictly perfect” (ibid: 11).

Rastafari Obia is shown as being concerned with Ogwu – the perfect medicine, the ultimate solution. Rastafari Obia is knowledge of the highest order, it is a “ramkin [ranking] dose of fatal deadly poison”; it is the “poison for all bad spirits.” This antidote for the Obeah Factory is self-knowledge. de Laurence Science teaches that “ignorance is the cause of imperfection. Men do not know themselves and therefore they do not understand the things of their inner world” (de Laurence 1939:396). The Science Man maintains that “each man has the essence of God, and all the wisdom and power of the world (germinically) in himself” (ibid). Self-knowledge, self-confidence and faith in ones power is the ranking dose of poison that will kill all the bad spirits of envy, jealousy, greed and ill-will. In notifying King George V, Royal head of the Obeah Factory and the “Monarch of hell bottom” that he had achieved the highest knowledge, Howell lays down a number of Laws/Decrees and makes several Holy Declarations of “the Sacred Order of His Majesty Ras Tafari:

- 1) People that are guilty of Obeah must not visit balm yards nor... the assembly of Black Supremacy
- 2) No admittance for fortune tellers, witch and old hag
- 3) No admittance for obeah dogs, none whatsoever
- 4) No admittance for ghost, witch, lizards
- 5) No admittance for Alligators, Snakes, Puss, Crabs, Flies...
Lodestones, Pins and Needles, Ravens, John Crows and Candles
- 6) Rum Bottles and Grave Yards are not required

- 7) The Woman's baby will strive in her belly
- 8) [Y]ou will not grudge, or obeah, or rob the people
- 9) You will not plant your obeah self with no man or woman
- 10) You will not blind, give big foot or sore, or turn any more children across the woman's belly and kill her baby when it is born

In laying down these laws Howell was appealing to Occult doctrine which states that "True magic power consists in true faith, but true faith rests in spiritual knowledge, and without that kind of knowledge there can be no faith" (de Laurence 1939:404). In refusing admittance to the legion of Obeah paraphernalia, Howell showed knowledge of the fact that Obia need "not require any ceremonies or conjurations, or the making of circles or signs; it requires neither benedictions or maledictions in words; neither verbal blessings nor curses; it can accomplish everything if it acts through a human mind which is in harmony with it, and without which nothing useful can be accomplished" (de Laurence 1939:404). These decrees relate specifically to the misuse of Science or the malpractice of Obia. The evils listed span the legion of iniquities committed by those who succumbed to the dictates of the Obeah Factory and use the "powers of Obi against each other" leading Modda to ask in earnest disgust some 72 years later, "What is all dis Obeah for?" Rendered differently, Modda is asking "why all dis Obeah?" The answer lies in the loss of self-confidence and in a subscription to belief in the impossibility of good. Howell vowed to cure this preponderance of stupidity and ignorance in the Rastafari Balm Yard.

Key Six, "Balm yard" and Key Eight "How to Fast" advances the Rastafari theology of Faith and Wisdom. Key Six states emphatically that "first and last, every soul for admission must be believers in the power of King Ras Tafari the living God" (Howell 2001:10). In teaching "How to Fast" Howell advises that "to overcome white bondage and filth and black hypocrisy amongst your own black skin, you have to fast hard" (ibid: 12). Fasting is defined as

a knowledge quest for “blessed are they that searcheth the deep things on the tree of life for His wisdom is deep and is past all finding out” (ibid). Howell gives the specifics of the ritual fast which includes the use of homeopathic salt. He suggests a Fast once per week which should be complemented by a Love Feast every three or six months. In declaring that “the misery of the land is healed by fasting” (Ibid: 10); Howell uses occult language to advocate for abstinence from materialism. He argues for a focus on spiritualism and not materialism. In Key Eight where fasting is described as a knowledge quest, we find reference to the mystical Tree of Life. In this veiled homage to *Kannabis Sativa*, Howell posits that the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are but one Tree and this Tree is the Holy Herb used cross-culturally to provide healing knowledge. At another level, the reference to the Tree of Life invokes the esoteric concept of the Sacred Pot which brews transcendental knowledge. In Igbo mysticism this is the *udu ogwu*, the traditional ritual magical/medicine pot used for divination and which contains special curative herbs and antidotes against poisons and mystic attacks (Umeh 1999a: 62-63). In Congo mysticism the *makuku matatu* or “three firestones” (Fu-Kiau 2001) is Sacred Pot which brews the traditional laws which govern Congo society. The three-legged pot which represents the “power of the trinity” – Wisdom, Knowledge and Understanding is a recurring symbol throughout ancient cultures. The use of the Myal Weed by Congolese spiritualists during the slave and colonial eras is part of this tradition of using entheogens as a means on invoking the Holy Spirit of Knowledge.

Key Four identifies the Rastafari Balm Yard as an Obia Mission. “A Balm Yard” says Howell; “is a Holy place that is wholly consecrated to God Almighty for the cleansing and healing of the nations. Where only the Holy Spirit of God alone is allowed to do the Royal work of healing” (Howell 2001:10). The Balming work is done by “consecrated men and

women that the Holy Spirit moves upon the blazing altar of their soul and endowed them with power that they command and handle the infirmities of the nations” (ibid). The conclusion of this Healing Key is a rhetorical affirmation of Howell’s ancestral lineage: “Have we any authority from King Alpha? Yes we are vessels of the divine honour. Have we any authority from the world? Assuredly yes indeed, King Alpha signs for our destiny and gave us His Supreme Affidavit for a trillion centuries after the end of eternal life” (ibid). Howell’s Mission Statement and claims to Divine Authority are paralleled in Igbo mysticism. The Igbo *Dibia* concurs:

You don’t confer powers to a *Dibia*. He or she comes into this world with those powers conferred upon him/her by Chukwu by dint of being possessed by Agwu, The Holy Spirit. A *Dibia* who is chosen and possessed by Agwu, the Holy Spirit becomes not only the vehicle for revelation and dissemination or propagation of knowledge and wisdom, as permitted or prudent, but also a medium for the exercise of uncanny skills and performance of miracles, near-miracles and mind-boggling feats. (Umeh 1997:82).

It may well be that the “Key Man lock the door and gone”; but “the wise black man, woman and children gaining knowledge diligently toward the truth of H.M. Ras Tafari Kingdom must be [*Dibia*] before one could possibly receive the truth” (Howell 2001:20). Jamaica’s most renown *Dibia* cautions Blacks against accepting a demonized African legacy: “Woe be unto the preacher of the white man’s doctrine [of] hypocrisy or devil worship” (ibid). It stands to reason therefore that some thirty-one years before Howell penned these words, the most renown British occultist Aleister Crowley would receive a Spiritual to establish an Obia Mission in which to learn Obia and teach Obeah. It is this new Euro-American “Science” that Howell would embrace while in New York and that on his return to Jamaica he would condemn as the commodification of spiritual knowledge. In his spiritual response to the social injustice in Jamaican society Howell would become the symbol of the merging of oral

African mystical traditions with literary Euro-American and East Indian mysticism. “All my springs are in thee” (Psalm 87:7 KJV) would become the Rastafari refrain affirming this eighth denomination of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church as a living symbol of all the previous emanations. Life is a circle and “whatever eats seven goes;” whatever eats seven goes on to reveal the Knowledge and Wisdom of *Chukwu Abiama* in the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari. “Whatever eats seven goes” on to preach the pan-human message of Christfulness: that self-knowledge is self love and that Love is the Law; [One Love], Under Will. In the tradition of the living God who symbolizes transcendental knowledge, His Imperial Majesty Jah Ras Tafari’s “body is the fullness of him that fillet all in all:” Ras Tafari is the Obic Christ.

Gnostic Obia from *Chukwu Abiama* to Jah Rastafari

Also the mantras and the spells; the [Obia] and the wanga, the work of the wand and the work of the sword; these he shall teach and learn. He must teach; but he may make severe the ordeals. The word of the Law is [Obia]. (Crowley 2007: 16-17)

These three verses from *The Book of the Law* are Crowley’s spiritual commission. Crowley, who attained the grade of Magus in the Order of the Golden Dawn took these lines to mean that: “An entirely new system of magic is to be learnt and taught ... The Obeah is the magic of the Secret Light with special reference to acts; the wanga is the verbal or mental correspondence of the same. The work of the wand is that of Union; of the sword, Division; these correspond to the two Phases of the Cosmic cycle” (Crowley 2002:38). Yet The Magus was aware that he perhaps had only a part of the equation for after several more comments including a definition of Mantras as “sentences proper to concentration of the mind by virtue of their constant repetition” and spells as “methods of communicating the will to other

beings;” Crowley offers that “If this text imply more than this, I know not of it; I ask pardon of Them that fashioned me and chose me for Their minister.” In speaking to Obia as the word of the Law, Crowley offers that Obia “also means Will in the Higher sense of Magical One-pointedness” and that “there is also most probably a very lofty secret interpretation.” He suggests “the essential” Word as Chokmah (Wisdom), Thoth (Thought), the *Logos* (God) with Obia as the mystical O; “the sum of all.” All these interpretations are conversant with Igbo mysticism.

Within the Jamaican context, Obia references healing knowledge while Wanga means poison. The word has been rendered variously throughout the historical texts as “wangla” (Cassidy and Le Page (1980:82); whangra (Lewis 1834:134 and Madden 1835:81) and wanga (Madden 1835:81). The phrase to “burn whangra” meant to poison by smoke inhalation. This was also called “smoking wanga.” Specifically, the name refers to the plant *Sesamum orientale* and from reports all parts of the plant including the seeds were burnt to “put Obeah” on someone. Matthew Gordon (Monk) Lewis, an English author, is one the few plantation owners who actually resided in Jamaica and who treated his slaves humanely. His *Journal of a West India Proprietor* documents life on his plantation from 1815-16 and 1817. In his journal entry for January 25, 1816, Lewis records that the use of the whangra plant to deter thieves involved an elaborate ritual. Matthew Lewis says of Edward the Obia man that “he gone at midnight into the bush' (i. e. the wood), and had gathered the plant whangra, which he had boiled in an iron pot, by a fire of leaves, over which he went puff, puffie: 'and said the sautee-sautee; and then had cut the whangra root into four pieces, three to bury at the plantation gates, and one to burn” (Lewis 1834: 134). Lewis reports that each piece of the whangra was given names. These 19th century accounts reveal that the Wanga profession,

has remain fairly stable compared to Obia's "strange career." The current meaning of the term as expressed in the D.J Tiger's 1986 song "Wanga Gut" is the same poison. However, the term denotes poisoning which stems from "the seven deadly sins" concentrated and manifested in "badmindedness" and "grudgefulness." The song cautions against being "Wanga Gut" – the victim of poison; it warns against befriending grudgeful people: "don't friend dem dey; dem will kill you yoh." Accordingly, Wanga is equated with Obeah as spiritual malpractice or the use of spiritual knowledge with harmful intent.

As a sacred text, *The Book of the Law* is distinctive in claiming to present the Law of the New Aeon; a Law which is for All. Of a fact, the creation of the New World by European imperialism resulted in a contradictory omen which corresponds "to the two Phases of the Cosmic cycle." The duality of oneness is expressed in the four-fold classification of Crowley's commission. These mystical Four Eyes, Four Moments, Four Spirits and Four Market Days rendered poetically: 1) the mantras and the spells 2) the Obia and the wanga 3) the work of the wand and the work of the sword 4) learn and teach. Union, is the work of the wand and the work of the sword, Division" writes Crowley (2002). Alternately, the work of the magical wand is that of creation; and the magical that of destruction. *Akwu*, the female principle is therefore symbolized by the wand; and *Obi*, the male principle by the sword. In this Law for the New Age, Mantras – orality is contrasted with Spells – literacy; Obia – healing medicine with Obeah – harmful medicine; Wand – creative force with Sword – destructive force; and learning – the acquisition of knowledge with teaching – the dispensation of knowledge. In commissioning Crowley to teach, Higher Consciousness gives him the leeway to "make the ordeals severe" with the understanding that "the word of the law is [Obia] and that "love is the law; love under will" (Crowley 2007: 21). This identification of Obia with love, references

the Igbo meaning of *Obi* which is heart. It also invokes the Akan *Obi* or somebody, denoting the human capacity for both love and hate, truth and error and healing and harming. The Book of the Law is mystical charting of the ordeal of Obia's strange career. It identifies the New Age of imperialism and capitalism as a complex ordeal involving the Obia Mission and Obia Factory; the Balm Yard and the Obeah Shop; the Obia and the Wanga.

This then is A Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church, a historical and contemporary study of the nature of God and religious truth in the island of Jamaica. It argues that Obia belongs in the tradition of Western esotericism; the tradition of alternative or marginalized religious movements distinguished by occult beliefs, practices and experiences. This theology of JamAfrican Obia posits Obia as a form of ancient African Gnosticism whose modern manifestations incorporate various other esoteric and exoteric traditions. As a New World religion, JamAfrican Obia is shown to have a unique association with Thelema Scientific Religion. Accordingly, Obia Esotericism in the broader sense defines African Diasporic emanations of primal Obia as well as later developments in 20th century Euro-American occult philosophy. In this conception, the term Obia defines one system of knowledge, the human cognitive schema. It is therefore multiple, interdisciplinary, ambiguous and endless. It is beyond *all* finding out. From *Chukwu Abiama* to Jah Rastafari shows Obia as a "complex" "signifier." But unlike previously, we can now define the "complex" and the "signifier". What complex? The Obia Mission Obeah Factory Complex. What is signified? The best and worst of what it means to be human; the best and worst of what it means to have a heart. It signifies the human desire for progress and development as well as the capacity to survive against all odds. Obia is African *Spirituology*, a system of

thought concerned with or centered on “Spirit” defined as revealed Knowledge and Wisdom. Gnostic *Obia* is “the unclean thing and powerful healing.”

“Bad luck worse dan *Obia*.” It is a truth, this much used Jamaican proverb. Within esoteric circles, what is popularly conceived as “bad luck” is mystically interpreted as the ordeals of destiny/fate or the ordeals of knowledge. Paradoxically, the one thing that *Obia* cannot cure is destiny/fate, yet *Obia* is itself subject to fate. The “mystical tide of the universe” assigned JamAfrican *Obia* a fate characterized by a complex interrelationship between *Obia* Mission and Obeah Factory; a fate re-veiled in the profanation of the principle of Wisdom and its demonization as Witchcraft. And so, four mystical years after Ralph Caine posed the seminal question: “What is this *Obi* or Obeah, which after more than a century’s Christianizing effort lurks behind every pledge of faith, and against which no legislation can prevail? (Caine 1908:124) we are able to state definitively that this *Obi* is the heart of the Great Physician and this *Obia* is a Healing Mission. And yet Modda question remains: “What is all dis *Obia* for?” The answer in esoteric language: “it is for the healing of the nations.” And even though “the full can never be told”, let these Doctor Words go forth to heal the Nation of JamObia Land We Love. One Love is the Law; One Love under Will.

Random Notes toward a Conclusion:

Meta-textuality, Phenomenal *Obia* and the Liberal Arts

“Let these Doctor Words go forth to heal the Nation of JamObia Land We Love. One Love is the Law; One Love under Will.” What chaotic ramblings, what ludicrous statements, what an “unscholarly” end to a repetitive but promising scholarship. It seems we are not such “a long way from Plato” after all. The modern academy has allowed for the expression of a metaphysical vision in a meta-textual account of *Obia*. In Plato’s own words, “No trace

of slavery ought to mix with the studies of the freeborn man. No study, pursued under compulsion, remains rooted in the memory."⁵⁰ Equally important is Plato's insistence that "Wisdom alone is the science of others sciences" and that

If the study of all these sciences which we have enumerated, should ever bring us to their mutual association and relationship, and teach us the nature of the ties which bind them together, I believe that the diligent treatment of them will forward the objects which we have in view, and that the labor, which otherwise would be fruitless, will be well bestowed.

Liberal Arts theorists in the modern academy maintain that "Education resides not in the collection and distribution of the product of our inquiries, but rather in the process of inquiring" (McCauley 1984: 53). Additionally, "the proper end of formal education is to establish in the individual virtuous habits of thought" such "habits of thought proper to this particular person in relation to his particular gifts" (Montgomery 1990:88). Phenomenologists of Religion who have studied the varieties of religious experience also argue for the recovery of the metaphysical vision in the modern academy. Arguing for *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Leeuw (1963) posits that the discipline of the Phenomenology of Religion is defined by "attempts to clarify what it has seen, and again (combining all previous activities) try to comprehend what has appeared" (15). Leeuw insists that in the final analysis, the Phenomenology of Religion "must confront chaotic 'reality', and its still uninterpreted signs, and ultimately testify to what it has understood (ibid). What we have understood by the chaotic reality of Obia still remains to be said in more concrete terms.

We have tried in five chapters to posit an interdisciplinary definition of JamAfrican Obia. In so doing, "we insist upon a reality, even if the words of that insistence are not themselves a sufficient witness to that reality" (Montgomery 1990:164). In our first chapter,

“A Preliminary towards JamAfrican Gnostic *Obia* Theology” we posited Spirit as the conceptual foundation of the modern academy and argued for it as a legitimate site of scholarly exploration. An interdisciplinary approach grounded in Esotericism and Cognitive Science of Religion was forwarded as most fruitful for answering the seminal question, what is *Obia*? We advanced Igbo mysticism which conceives of *Chukwu Abiama* (God) as “the wisdom and the knowledge that reveals himself,” and Thelema Scientific Religion which defines *Obia* as the power of the mind to effect change, as two Occult Theologies pertinent to the study of *Obia*. Chapter 2, “One Negro can Bewitch another, (*Obia* They Call It)”: Working “The Unclean Thing” and Effecting “Powerful Healing” is a narrative account which shows us that *Obia* is as much an enigma among practitioners and patients as it is among academics.

The “History of the Problem of *Obia*” charted in Chapter 3 demonstrates that from the colonizer’s perspective, *Obia* was “as Powerful an Agent as Slavery.” The Niger Delta is shown as the place of origin for “This Black Thread of Mischief,” with the Bight of Biafra being recast as “The Bight of *Obia*.” Accordingly, we provided twenty-five Biafran cognates for *Obia* along with other etyma primarily for the Gold Coast and Congo. Chapter 4, “From *Obia* Mission to Obeah Factory: Spirit Theology and The JamAfrican *Obia* Catholic Church” traced the origin of the term to the Niger Delta *Mbia Ogwu* – the ultimate medicine. It posited that this *Mbia Ogwu* – the ultimate medicine, ultimately led to the formation of eight major *Obia* denominations on Jamaican soil. The present chapter, Gnostic *Obia*: African Spirituology from *Chukwu Abiama* to Jah Rastafari makes knowledge claims about *Obia* and Rastafari based on the transcendental experience. We spoke to the negative impact of “The Betta Dan Syndrome” on Jamaican society and advanced the theory of African Spirituology as a proper

means of addressing the dis-ease produced by an acceptance of “The Impossibility of Good.” And now the writer argues that all of this *Obia* is a manifestation of the metaphysical vision in Plato’s academy; evidence of the writer getting close to *psi* in the Turnerian vision of Spiritual Anthropology. And yet, there is something to be said about getting too close to “it”. Self-reflexivity demonstrates that “whatever deceives men seems to produce a magical enchantment” (Plato). Within the context of pan humanism, all we have arrived at are a series of platitudes. From all this Gnostic *Obia* we may conclude that “wisdom or being wise appears to be not the knowledge of the things which we do or do not know, but only the knowledge that we know or do not know” (Plato).

We have made various knowledge claims about *Obia*. We have said among other things, that the term “*Obia*” is, (1) a conceptual metaphor for God (the Supreme Being); (2) revealed wisdom and knowledge; (3) a signifier for African culture and religion in Jamaica; (4) a healing Mission; (5) panhuman universal religion/catholicism; (6) African Spirituology (7) the unclean thing and powerful healing (8) Mind or Will (9) The Mystic Revelation of Rastafari; (10) the ultimate medicine. We have stated that among the Igbo, *Obia* is synonymous with *Mbia Ogwu* – holistic healing performed by expatriate *Ndibias*. We have used the concept of African Spirituology to describe this system of holistic healing performed by the inspiration of *Nne Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of Knowledge. In defining *Obia* – the ultimate medicine as a system of knowledge, or particular use of the mind, we have equated *Obia* with Education, in particular a Liberal Arts education characterized by interdisciplinarity. Accordingly, we concur that the purpose of *Obia* as “education is to develop a good mind, which means improving our analytical, critical, and imaginative powers while cultivating the moral and intellectual virtues” (McCauley 1984:53). Education or the minding of knowledge is

a lifelong process. The processes of analysis and imaginative reasoning attendant to Obia “have no end” – every idea, every theory, every conclusion is but an initiation, a beginning; and for Plato “the beginning is the most important part of the work.”

What we have begun to do is to put Obia in the realm of the panhuman. Like the emerging research on Vodou, Obia scholarship must situate “the religion within a broader Afro-Atlantic historical and cultural context, one reshaped by the economic and social effects of the slave trade, the intense cultural encounters forged in the Caribbean, and the difficult development of human relationships within these contexts” (Dubois 2001:99). When we claim that the British Obeahed Obia, what we are saying is that continental African Obia is manifested in the Caribbean by the processes of Creolization and Transculturation, which were themselves shaped by Enlightenment thought. During this Age of Enlightenment which fostered the European slave trade, there was an emphasis on scientific method, rationality, natural history, capitalism and democracy. The period also saw a rise in literacy, an increased consumption of reading materials and an increase in the establishment of academies across Europe. Importantly, it was during the Enlightenment that Freemasonry was officially established in Europe. These Secret Societies, Lodges or stone masonic guilds were founded under the banner “liberty, fraternity and equality” and their sworn duty was to initiate the unenlightened. This enlightenment or initiation occurred under the auspices of the supreme divinity known as The Grand Architect who was thought to create a scientifically ordered universe (Jacob 1991; Shapin 1994; Israel 2001).

The Myal Society, as well as other Africana Secret Societies, when placed within this wider context of the European Enlightenment becomes a testament not only to man’s innate desire for freedom and equality, but also to the inherent contradiction in the European

pursuit of “liberty, fraternity and equality.” The Myal Society sought to initiate the unenlightened into a brotherhood of freedom. Its theology was pan-African, and it was a Society open to all. Accordingly, like Vodou, Obia, “far from being the antithesis of ‘modernity’ that it has often been posed to be, in fact provides a window into the profound aftereffects of the processes of enslavement, migration, production and cultural confrontation that have shaped today’s Americas” (Dubois 2001:99). As a Creole religion, which emerged during the Enlightenment, Obia bears the marks of the period’s battle between science and religion on the one hand, and modernity and tradition on the other. Foucault in asking “What is Enlightenment?” maintains that “modernity is an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it” (Foucault 1984:41). This description of modernity echoes the definition of Obia as both the unclean thing and powerful healing. It at once exposes the dialectic of Obia as both (1) a process and product Creolization; (2) ancient and modern; (3) science and magic and; (4) both African and British. It is against this backdrop of modernity that we must embrace Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism as one and the same as ancient Igbo Mysticism.

In “Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism,” Asprem notes that Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism provides a “method to check both the validity of spirits encountered, and of the visionary experiences themselves” (Asprem 2008:157). Crowley’s insistence on test and experiment, on the verification of the mystical experience by the paraphernalia of science, produced numerous science manuals of which *Liber 777* is the most comprehensive. *Liber 777*, an expansive manual of mystical associations, is a “periodic table of magic” which combines Hebrew *gematria* and with the

correspondences of the Sephiroth to create “the most important methodological tools for testing visions” (Asprem 2008:160). Accordingly, Crowley’s “Revival Table” is an outlay of correspondences available to the seeker who wants to “prove every Spirit.” For example, those who wish to learn the Occult discipline of Astral Scrying or Astral Travel may use the corresponding symbols to guide them to particular places in the Astral realm. Additionally, those who wish to verify the correspondences between Hindu, Chinese, Hebrew and Egyptian magical systems will find Crowley’s Liber 777 indispensable. Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism is in every way an exact Science, the “ex” representing “x” – the unknown factor which provides for the ordeals and joys of existence. Crowley, like the Akan and the Igbo mystic, equates the planet Mercury with the human mind, and accordingly admits that “one of the most unfathomably dreadful dangers of the Path is that you must trust Mercury, and yet that if you trust him you are certain to be deceived. I can only explain this, if at all, by pointing out that, since all truth is relative, all truth is falsehood. In one sense Mercury is the great enemy; Mercury is mind, and it is the mind that have set out to conquer” (Crowley 1987:27).

In the end, this “Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church is an invitation to Empiricism” for as Plato tells us, “knowledge becomes evil if the aim be not virtuous.” As a testament to our mystical journey, we have offered The JamAfrican Obia Wheel as a glyph of this scholarship on Gnostic *Obia*. The Wheel gives definition to an otherwise obscure form, and accordingly lends itself to scientific verification. Indeed, the dreams, visions, ciphers, keys, sigils, geometries, letters and numbers which converge on the consciousness of Obia practitioners worldwide contain the Knowledges by which these mystics are able to divine for themselves and others. A definitively on the iconography of JamAfrican Obia is yet to be

written. Obia is generally thought to be the least discrete of all the African-derived religious traditions in the Caribbean. But we have in Umeh's oeuvre a scholarly and verifiable account of the Mystical Science of the Igbo *Ndibia*. In *Thelema Scientific Religion* we have an exemplary teaching of the "Obeah and the Wanga" and a "multitude of [literary] occasions" which should provoke us to the study of Obia as a panhuman phenomenon. As the only new religion emerging out of African experience of slavery in the West, and as the most successful and most recent Creole religion of Jamaica, Rastafari is a fertile site for the exploration of Obia as a form of Gnosticism. These three tenets of Africana and Euro-American mysticism will prove useful avenues for "the diligent treatment" of "Revealed Wisdom and Knowledge." We begin Obia Theology with the Socratic methodology of Plato: "And what knowledge ought we to acquire? May we not answer with absolute truth – A knowledge which will do us good?"

The Universities do not teach all things,
so a doctor must seek out old wives, gypsies, sorcerers,
wandering tribes, old robbers, and such outlaws,
and take lessons from them.
A Doctor must be a Traveler.
Knowledge is Experience.

Paracelsus (1493-1541)

END NOTES

¹ These phrases are responses given by informants who answered the question: What is Obia? These definitional phrases are a compilation from informants in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Atlanta, New York and Massachusetts in the U.S.A.

² See the biblical story of the Exodus.

³ Personal conversation September 2008

⁴ The use of the term Catholic does not reference the Roman Catholic Church. The term is used as a solely as a synonym for universal religion. The term is occult in origin and is still used within the Occult Tradition even though it has been adapted by and is now used extensively by exoteric Christian denominations headed by the Church in Rome.

⁵ Personal Interview, April 2007

⁶ Nuff thanks to Professor Jerome Handler for making available to me the manuscript of his forthcoming publication *Anti-Obeah Provisions in the Laws of the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760s to 2009*.

⁷ Hereinafter cited as “The 1789 Committee Report.”

⁸ Hereinafter cited as “The 1866 Royal Report.”

⁹ “Having belly” is a common female complaint. It is manifested in the appearance of a “big belly” – of being impregnated – for months or years without giving birth. An alternative manifestation is giving birth to some foul-smelling mass or otherwise non-human inanimate form after the nine-month gestation period.

¹⁰ This phrase refers to the general tendency to invoke the name Jesus at the encounter with spiritual malevolence or under other dire circumstances. It usually involves repetition of the word “Jesus” and/or the recitation of some powerful Psalm or bible verse. Psalm 23 and 91 are among the most commonly used.

¹¹ See Kenneth Bilby’s “The Strange Career of Obeah” for an instructive critique of Williams’ work.

¹² The term Spirit thievery describes the persistent dehumanization of Africans which robs them of health and well-being, thereby producing severe psychological and spiritual suffering. This anthropological impoverishment commenced with the slave system which denied Africans of their human rights including the freedom to worship; so that they constituted chattel – property – whose sole reason for being was to work. This soul-sucking identity theft continues unabated within the structures of neo-colonialism and globalization.

¹³ Hear “Monkey Man” by The Maytals. 1969. Trojan Records.

¹⁴ The emerging discipline of Esotericism is supported (among others) by the following three organizations. *The Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE)* was founded at Michigan State University in August 2002. The mission of the Association for the Study of Esotericism is to promote excellence in scholarship and teaching in the study of esotericism and mysticism. The Association publishes the journal *Esoterica* and has so far produced two major publications are *Studies in Esotericism: Esotericism, Art, and Imagination* and *Esotericism, Religion, and Nature*. The Association’s website is <http://www.aseweb.org>. Alternate access: <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/>.

The ESSWE was founded in 2005 as the European counterpart of the ASE. The *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism* was founded in “is a learned society, established in 2005 to advance the academic study of the various manifestations of Western esotericism from late antiquity to the present, and to secure the future development of the field.” It publishes the journals *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, and *Ésotérisme et Initiation*, and is associated with *Gnostika, Ambix, Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* and *Esoterica*. The ESSWE located at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Website: <http://www.esswe.org>

The *Societas Magica* is an organization dedicated to furthering communication and exchange among scholars interested in the study of magic, both in the positive contexts of its expression as an area of necessary knowledge or religious practice (as in early modern occultism and contemporary paganism), and in its negative contexts as the substance of an accusation or condemnation (as in sorcery trials, and many philosophical and theological accounts, both early and late). The Society publishes the journal *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*. Website: <http://www.societasmagica.org/>

¹⁵ There is a controversy surrounding this publication. As the story goes, the book was lent to Crowley by Mathers. After they had a falling out, Crowley who translated the text, published it in 1904.

¹⁶ Voudon is an occult spelling used by Bertiaux to distinguish esoteric knowledge from scholarly convention.

¹⁷ These peculiarities of the Obia man are in many ways similar to those of the early Rastas, who established the “rude bwoy” dress code. In their anti-colonial stance they rejected the dress code of the colonial. They went about rags hanging from their pockets, shirts out of pants, rolled up pants legs and the very terrifying “dread(ful)” locks. It did not help when they began to speak in an “unknown tongue” – the argot Rasta talk (lyaric). These Rastas engendered the myth of the “Black Heart Man”, who kidnapped children in order to steal their hearts. Bunny Waller reinterprets this vision of the Rastaman in his Album and title

track of the same name *Black Heart Man*. Rumors of occultists kidnapping children and stealing hearts are legendary throughout Europe. See Crowley's *Gilles De Rais: The Banned Lecture* (1930) for a characteristic tongue in cheek treatment of this subject. Noting the tendency of the Christian mind to "associate the pursuit of knowledge with the most abominable crimes," Crowley offers that "whenever the questions arise with regard to black magic or black masses, invocations of the devil, etc., etc., it must never be forgotten that these practices are strictly functions of Christianity. Where ignorant savages perform propitiatory rites, there and there only Christianity takes hold. But under the great systems of the civilized parts of the world, there is no trace of any such perversion of religious feeling. It is only the bloodthirsty and futile Jehovah who has achieved such monstrous births. Such upas-trees can only grow in the poisonous mire fear and shame where thought has putrefied to Christianity" (9).

¹⁸ A deceitful person and/or a trickster is generally referred as *bandoloo*.

¹⁹ "Grow pon foot" is the phrase used to reference "journeying in the spirit" which is not accompanied by full possession trance. This is the opposite of being "slain in the spirit" where the person is stationed in one place and is tended to as she travels in the Spirit. When one "grow pon foot", one is able to perform all the their daily activities (albeit to less efficient degree) while receiving visions and other messages.

²⁰ I found this yearning for an alternate lifestyle to be common among Revival women who were called from an early age. Being called as a teenager they feel deprived them of a normal life with social mobility. One Revival sister from Manchester who wanted to be a teacher, told me that she regrets not pursuing a teaching career. She feels cheated when she sees the lifestyle of her peers who had less scholarly aptitude. When asked by them "what happen?" she speaks about being called to do the work of the Lord. Many spiritualists feel that it is not so much the demands of the Spirit that refuse them a more rounded existence, but rather Jamaican society which ostracizes them. On the other hand I have met some young women, fewer in number, who do feel fulfilled by their vocation and abhor secular work.

²¹ Revival religiosity demands the wearing of very long dresses and the covering of the head, as well as "uniforms" designed by the Spirit. In addition, pants and sleeveless blouses or dresses are forbidden for women, who must attire themselves with utmost modesty.

²² See Jane Beck (1976a) "The Implied Obeah Man" for a discussion of this phenomenon in 20th West Indies as evidenced in "the Wind-ward Islands of the Lesser Antilles. Bequia, Grenada, and Dominica... respectively the homes of ... three implied obeah men (26)."

²³ See the "Di Spirit Neva Right" in this chapter for a narrative on false pregnancy or "having belly."

²⁴ Sobo (1993) offers a detailed treatment of the fears associated with this phenomenon in her *One Blood: The Jamaican Body*.

²⁵ *Jamaicans for Justice* is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-violent, volunteer citizens' rights action group founded in 1999, under the motto "Justice, Truth be Ours Forever." The organization believes that the "majority of Jamaicans are decent, law abiding citizens; that each person is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law; that each citizen deserves respect, freedom and the right to enjoy a peaceful existence." It "sees a Jamaica where the rights of all are assured, where there is equal opportunity for citizens to realize their potential and enjoy a sense of well-being ... [and] a Jamaica where its culture is enhanced, respected, and shared." See <http://www.jamaicansforjustice.org>

²⁶ The term 'Obeahworker' may be used to reference Obeah practitioners but is used more generally to describe persons who consult Obeah practitioners with evil intent. There is a belief among some, that Obeah practitioners may be considered blameless, as it is often the client who makes evil demands of the Obeahman who is paid to do a job. Additionally, there are persons who are considered "little Obeahman" or "little Obeahwoman" in their "own rites", in that they are not professionals, but often engage in "self-help rituals."

²⁷ See Bilby and Handler 2004 for an extensive overview of Obeah laws in Anglophone Caribbean. See also Diana Paton's "Obeah Acts" 2009.

²⁸ This figure applied to Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

²⁹ In Congo religion *Kalunga* refers to the "threshold between worlds" of the living and the dead. For descendants of enslaved Africans in the New World, the Atlantic Ocean is the *Kalanga*, the line which when crossed signified death or entry into the place of no return. See Robert Farris Thompson *Flash of the Spirit*.

³⁰ Kopytoff (1973:15) notes that these Negroes were alternately referred to as Varmahaly, Vermaxales and Vermahalles.

³¹ Jamaica was actually a Spanish colony for 161 years, from 1494 when it was first "sighted" by Christopher Columbus, to the 1655 British invasion. Further, although the British captured the island in 1655, it took them fifteen years, until 1670, for the island to be officially ceded to them by the Treaty of Madrid. This 1670 acquisition of Jamaica made it the fifth British colony in the New World, after Barbados, St. Kitts, Antigua and Nevis under British rule from the 1620s.

³² *Makuku matatu* is a Kongolese phrase meaning "The Three Firestones." Alternately, it is *Makuku Matatu Malamba Kongo* - the three fireplaces which "cook Kongo." This is the trinity on which the world is built or the foundation of existence as conceived by *Nabi Kongo* (Kongo Great Initiates). It is the conceptual basis for Jamaica's three footed

“yabba” pot used in former times for cooking and also by Mpokominya practitioners for various esoteric purposes. In general terms to possess a “Congo Pot” is practice Obia.

³³ Igbo cognates are gathered primarily from Umeh’s *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area* (1999) and *After God is Dibia* (1997) and Michael Echuero’s *Igbo-English Dictionary* (1998). From Echeru 1998: *obi*: chest; upper half of body; *obi*: temper or disposition; *obi*: *Oku*: quick or hot tempered; *obi*: ebele, *obi ebere*: mercy, gentleness of heart; *Obi*: chief, king; *obi ama*: communal village hall. Efik terms - *Abiaidiöñ* -wizard Malcolm 1922: 220); *abia ibok* – expert of magic-medicine (Simmons 1956:223) who suggests that the term might be cognate of West Indian Obeah; *Mbiam* – Magical liquid (Simmonds 1956; 226 ; Malcolm 1922:220) and *Ubio* – earth charm Allsop 1996). The Ijaw/Nembe term *obi* means sickness and/or disease (Allsop 1996).

The other etyma are derived from Warner-Lewis (2003) and Handler and Bilby (2001). The list provided Handler and Bilby (2001:96) includes entries from various dictionaries including Holm and Shilling’s *Dictionary of Bahamian English*. and Allsop’s *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*:

Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage, p.412. The specific African terms given as possible etyma in Allsop’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).

³⁴ The Bedward March of April 1921 is also properly placed within this context of “Religion and Revolt”. The march involved over 700 persons, including many women and children marching to the song “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Prophet Bedward founder of The Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church was leader of the largest Revival group from 1895-1921. The march was a protest against charges leveled at him for use of seditious language, which accused the government of implementing racist policies, among other atrocities. He was found guilty, imprisoned and died in incarceration in 1930. See Elkins 1977.

³⁵ Even more than Tacky, the exploits of Three Finger’d Jack went on to capture the British imagination. The Obia legend Three Finger’d Jack became British theatre at the turn

of the 19th century and the play entitled *The Life and Exploits of Three-Finger'd Jack, The Terror of Jamaica* by one William Burdett was published at least four times by 1801.

³⁶ This ability to be invulnerable to bullets is common among Spirit Warriors. In *Black Elk Speaks*, the Oglala medicine man gives a vivid description of his own encounters with the American colonizers. Black Elk reported “I had no gun, and when we were charging, I just held the sacred bow out in front of me with my right hand. The bullets did not hit us at all” (Neihardt 1972:220). Further, it must be noted that African fighters still possess this war medicine today. An acquaintance of mine who witnessed the recent Sierra Leone civil war told me that when he was “in the bush” he saw Africans being shot at, at very close range without being affected by bullets which either bounced off or changed trajectory. Shaking his head at memories, he spoke to the hypocrisy of those who witnessed these events daily and return to the West without scarcely a mention. He bemoaned the fact that “nobody talks about this shit!”

³⁷ In his article “Neither Here nor There: The Place of “Community” in the Jamaica Religious Imagination” Bilby uses the phrase “Convince Spirits: Workers on the Move” to describe the mystical travellings of Bongo spirits. As an example, he records the discourse of one possessive Bongo spirit: “the possessive spirit, a talkative fellow who called himself Silence-Man expounded on what he called his ‘nation.’ ‘We are Africans,’ he said. ‘We fly from Africa to go to United States, go to England, go to North pole, and go to the Moon” (1999b:311).

³⁸ All cognates are from Christaller (1933: 20-21), except for *obi a onnim biribi* which is from Kotey (1998:109).

³⁹ It should be noted that Christian Myalists came to separate themselves from the original Black Baptist Church which tried to maintain a form of orthodoxy. There was proliferation of Christian Myal groups around 1812. This is evidenced by the fact that Moses Baker, Liele’s cohort in St. James sent for help from the British Baptist Missionary Society. Shirley Gordon (1996) notes that Spirit Baptist sects were flourishing by 1812. Accordingly, “when he [Moses Baker] appealed to the British Baptist Missionary Society for help in 1812, he was losing ground to Myalism among his flocks. The Native Baptists on the western estates were clearly doing what might be termed hedging their spiritual bets by reconciling old beliefs with new practices.”(48)

⁴⁰ Conversation with Professor Robert Hill, July 2008.

⁴¹ “Comfa” from Akan *Okomfo* (ritual priest). In Guyana, Comfa is synonymous with Obia. See for example, Geoffrey Giddings entry on “Obeah” in the *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (2009: 472-473) where Obeah is defined exclusively as Comfa and described as “part

of a web of such other Africanist forms as Cumina (Jamaica), Big Drum (Grenada and Carriacou), Black Carib (Belize) Kele (St. Lucia), Santeria (Cuba) and Rastafari” (473).

⁴² Interview with Sister Sis February 2007

⁴³ Conversation with Professor Robert Hill, July 2008

⁴⁴ Conversation with Professor Robert Hill, July 2008.

⁴⁵ See for example *Marijuana Medicine: A World Tour of the Healing and Visionary Powers of Cannabis* (2001) by Christian Rätsch; *Cannabis and Culture* (1975) by Vera Rubin; *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (1904) by Herbert George Wells; *Cannabis: A History* (2005) by Martin Booth.

⁴⁶ de Laurence’s 1915 edition is the 5th edition of the original German text which published in 1849 and the second English translation. The first English edition was published in 1880 by Victor Printing Company in Elizabethville, Pennsylvania, USA. Jamaican Obia practitioners’ use of this ancient grimoire placed them among some of the earliest spiritualists in the Americas who utilized these particular Kabbalistic Keys.

⁴⁷ A litany of definitions of Obia from both oral and written sources used throughout the dissertation.

⁴⁸ This is seen for example in the words “be[lie]f” and “[up]pressor”. Belief is seen as containing the negative vibration of “lie” while “oppressor” has a contradictory phonology, using the positive sound/vibration “up” to express a negative situation. [Up]pressor is therefore expressed as [down]pressor in Dread Talk, while the term “belief” is avoided and replaced by I-sight (as in insight). See Birhan 1982.

⁴⁹ In Mystical Counting or Theological Arithmetic numbers are added together to a single digit: $445 = 4+4+5 = 13 = 4$.

⁵⁰ I have deliberately used Plato’s quotes without the benefit of citations to make a point about Obia as a technology used to access information. These sayings of Plato who lived some 2400 years ago were accessed by “Googlemancy” on the Internet or Worldwide Web. Today, we take computer technology for granted in the same way that Africans took mystical technology for granted in the period prior to European contact and cognitive terrorism. One way of understanding Obia is to conceive of it as computer technology. *Dibia Umeh* makes this point when he says that African mystics are “post-literate” not “illiterate,” and that “Afa divination is a mystic super-computer of limitless capacity as well as limitless retrieval abilities” (Umeh 1999a: 68). Like “Googlemancy”, to divine by Afa is to access “what is, what was, and what will be.” Accordingly, Obia defined as the ability to access the

“universal mind” or God as “knowledge and wisdom” is “the most capable, the most comprehensive and complete as well as the most convenient and the least costly computer ever known to man” (Umeh 1999: 68). It will help us to understand Obia if we “see” the World Wide Web as a manifestation of the occult workings of the universe. Every time we “log on” to the Internet we are “working Obia” and every time we access occult knowledge (bank account balances, emails, live journals and the like) by the use of passwords, we are using Occult Keys to unlock Secret Knowledge inaccessible to those uninitiated in the Knowledge our individual existence.

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