Jerome S. Handler & Kenneth M. Bilby


Obeah is an integral aspect of a complex belief system that was taken to the Caribbean by enslaved Africans and then creolized. Part of what looked to slaveholders like a “dark” and sinister body of beliefs and practices, it was vilified and eventually outlawed in the British colonies, albeit surprisingly late in the era of slavery (1760 onward), and has remained so to this day except in just four islands. In less than 200 pages, Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby examine the obeah laws of the entire Commonwealth Caribbean comparatively from their inception, presenting readers with a comprehensive analysis of the thinking behind the enactment of the laws in the first place and their perpetuation into the postcolonial era.

The broad arguments of Enacting Power are straightforward. Partially out of fear of the ability of obeah practitioners to empower the enslaved people to resist slavery, and as part of a broader strategy to try to exercise hegemonic control over them, slaveholders regarded obeah as witchcraft and sorcery and criminalized it. When slavery ended, legislation outlawing obeah was embodied in new vagrancy laws patterned on an 1824 English act and, after mid-century, also in new obeah laws that have remained on the statute books with very minimal alteration since the late nineteenth century. Strikingly, none of these laws clearly defined obeah or (except in isolated instances) identified the instruments obeah practitioners allegedly used. This gave those in charge of the police and judicial systems enormous oppressive power to label as obeah any practice they did not understand but nevertheless considered suspicious and subversive, and to prosecute, execute, and transport the “offenders” during slavery, or to fine, jail, and flog them after slavery ended.

Handler and Bilby show a clear consistency in the obeah legislation throughout the region, including the language, which demonstrates extensive borrowing to deal with common sociocultural concerns of a white minority who held power at least until the 1940s. They discuss the evolution of the anti-obeah laws in all of the former British Caribbean colonies and assert that these laws were in large part designed to stigmatize and devalue the broad mosaic of Afro-creole culture, and to construct and maintain a hierarchy that placed the Euro-oriented culture of the white elites at its apex. That the laws still remain in force in most territories, even after political independence, is testimony to the persistence of the cultural ideas and attitudes of the old white merchant-planter aristocracy amidst the new middle and upper classes.
many of whom ironically have their roots in the formerly enslaved populations.

Because the draconian laws literally drove obeah underground, and lawmakers and enforcers on one hand, and practitioners and their mainly lower-class clients on the other, had vastly different perceptions of it, Handler and Bilby acknowledge that it remains unclear what obeah really is. However, they argue cogently that it was certainly not the evil, harmful practice of witchcraft and sorcery portrayed by elite legislators and contemporary writers; rather, it was primarily a benign system of spiritual healing for individual and social good, “bringing good fortune, diagnosing illness and healing, finding lost or stolen goods, protecting from harm” (p. 5). It was elite writings and pronouncements that transformed fantasies of obeah as an evil into legislated “reality.”

Nor, Handler and Bilby assert, was there in the case of Jamaica any opposition between obeah (evil) and myal (good). This too, they argue, reflected the ignorance of missionary and other elite commentators who misunderstood what they may have observed or heard and interpreted it in a narrow ethnocentric manner. The misunderstandings were given intellectual credibility by American anthropologist Joseph J. Williams who “established” the roots of the dichotomy in the Asante Obayifo (“evil witchdoctor”) and Okomfo (“good priest”). Handler and Bilby, however, maintain that “obeah and myal were never inherently opposed; rather, they have long formed complementary parts ... of a single Afro-Creole cultural system in Jamaica” (p. 11).

Although they argue that the laws played a critical role in shaping negative attitudes to obeah in the Caribbean, Handler and Bilby reserve some of their most stringent criticisms for scholars whose work they believe has helped to perpetuate biases against obeah. They contend that by relying excessively on written sources and accepting obeah as just sorcery, witchcraft, and fraud, much modern scholarship has reinforced the negative imaging of obeah and thus validated those images with the authoritative stamp of the academy. They hold strongly to the view that the best way to counteract this sort of scholarly bias is through detailed ethnographic field work. Such research would probably provide more valuable data on what exactly constitutes obeah, and on the associated beliefs and practices, through the eyes of obeah practitioners themselves.

Handler and Bilby have accomplished their ambitious project with great success and clarity. They have filled a major lacuna in the scholarship of obeah, although by their own admission more research still needs to be done to achieve a fuller understanding of this belief system and its associated practices. Their comparative regional approach and historical analysis of the obeah
legislation of each jurisdiction have paved the way for future scholars to delve deeper into this field of enquiry. *Enacting Power* achieves what it sets out to do and adds significantly to the growing body of historical scholarship on Caribbean culture.

*Brian L. Moore*
Department of History, Colgate University
Hamilton NY 13346, U.S.A.

blmoore@colgate.edu