

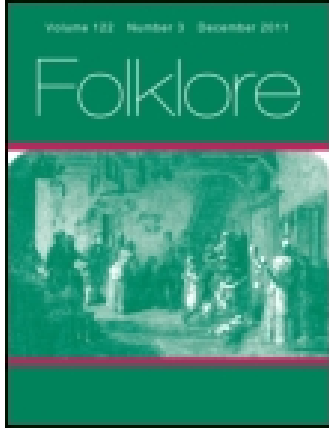
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OBEAH WORSHIP IN EAST AND WEST INDIES.

I.—IN JAMAICA.

THE mystery with which the professors of "Obeah" have always surrounded themselves, and the dread negroes have always had, and still have, of their power, have made it very difficult to find out much about the worship or superstition.

The best account is that contained in Edward's *History of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, published in 1793, and was transmitted by the Agent of Jamaica to the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council, and by them subjoined to their report on the Slave Trade.

"The term *Obeah* is now become in Jamaica the general term to denote those Africans who in that island practise witchcraft or sorcery, comprehending also the class of what are called Myal-men, or those who, by means of a narcotic potion made with the juice of an herb, which occasions a trance or profound sleep of a certain duration, endeavour to convince the deluded spectators of their power to reanimate dead bodies.

"As far as we are able to decide from our own experience and information, when we lived in the island, and from the current testimony of all the negroes we have ever conversed with on the subject, the possessors of *Obi* are, and always were, natives of Africa and none other; and they have brought the science with them to Jamaica, where it is so universally practised that we believe there are few of the large estates, possessing native Africans, which have not one or more of them. The oldest and most crafty are those who attract the greatest devotion

and confidence ; those whose hoary heads and a somewhat peculiarly harsh and forbidding aspect, together with some skill in plants of the medicinal and poisonous species, have qualified them for successful imposition on the weak and credulous. The negroes in general, whether Africans or creoles (*i.e.*, born in Jamaica), revere, consult, and fear them ; to these oracles they resort, and with the most implicit faith, upon all occasions, whether for the cure of disorders, the obtaining revenge for injuries or insults, the conciliation of favours, the discovery and punishment of the thief or adulterer, and the prediction of future events. The trade which these impostors carry on is extremely lucrative ; they manufacture and sell their *Obies*, adapted to different cases, and at different prices. A veil of mystery is studiously thrown over their incantations, to which the midnight hours are allotted, and every precaution is taken to conceal them from the knowledge and discovery of the white people. The deluded negroes, who thoroughly believe in their supernatural power, become the willing accomplices of their concealment, and the stoutest among them tremble at the very sight of the ragged bundle, the bottle, or the egg-shells, which are stuck in the thatch, or hung over the door of a hut, or upon the branch of a plantation-tree, to deter marauders.

“ In cases of poison, the natural effects of it are, by the ignorant negroes, ascribed entirely to the potent workings of *Obi*. The wiser negroes hesitate to reveal their suspicions through a dread of incurring the terrible vengeance which is fulminated by the Obeah-men against any who should betray them. It is very difficult, therefore, for the white proprietor to distinguish the Obeah possessor from any other negro upon his plantation ; and so infatuated are the blacks in general that but few instances occur of their having courage enough to impeach these miscreants. With minds so firmly prepossessed, they no sooner find *Obi set for them*, near the door of their house, or in the path which leads to it, than they give themselves

up for lost. When a negro is robbed of a fowl or a hog he applies directly to the Obeah-man or woman; it is then made known among his fellow-blacks that *Obi* is set for the thief, and as soon as the latter hears the dreadful news his terrified imagination begins to work; no resource is left but in the superior skill of some more eminent black man of the neighbourhood, who may counteract the magical operations of the other; but if no one can be found of higher rank or ability, or if, after gaining such an ally, he should still fancy himself affected, he presently falls into a decline, under the incessant horror of impending calamities. The slightest painful sensation in the head, or any part, any casual loss or hurt, confirms his apprehensions, and he believes himself the devoted victim of an invisible and irresistible agency. Sleep, appetite, and cheerfulness forsake him, his strength decays, his disturbed imagination is haunted without respite, his features wear the settled gloom of despondency; dirt, or any other unwholesome substance, becomes his only food; he contracts a morbid habit of body, and gradually sinks into the grave.

“A negro who is taken ill inquires of the Obeah-man the cause of his sickness, whether it will prove mortal or not, and within what time he shall die or recover. The oracle generally ascribes the distemper to *Obi*, the malice of some particular person, and advises to set *Obi* for that person. Considering the multitude of occasions which may provoke the negroes to exercise the powers of *Obi* against each other, and the astonishing influence of the superstition on their minds, we cannot but attribute a very considerable portion of the annual mortality among the negroes of Jamaica to this fascinating mischief. In the year 1760, when a formidable insurrection of the Koromantyn, or Gold-Coast negroes, broke out in the parish of St. Mary's, and spread through almost every other district of the island, an old Koromantyn negro, the chief instigator and oracle of the insurgents in that parish, who had admin-

istered the fetish or solemn oath to the conspirators, and furnished them with a magical preparation which was to render them invulnerable, was fortunately apprehended, convicted, and hung, with all his feathers and trumperies about him, and his execution struck the insurgents with a general panic. The examinations which were taken at that time first opened the eyes of the public to the very dangerous tendency of Obeah practices, and gave birth to the law for their suppression and punishment. But neither the terror of this law, nor the strict investigation which has ever since been made after the possessors of *Obi*, nor the many examples of those who from time to time have been hanged or transported, have hitherto produced the desired effect. We conclude, therefore, that either this sect, like others, has flourished under persecution, or that fresh supplies are annually introduced from the African seminaries. The *Obi* is usually composed of a farrago of materials, most of which are enumerated in the Jamaica law passed in 1760, viz., blood, feathers, parrots' beaks, dogs' teeth, alligators' teeth, broken bottles, grave-dirt, rum, and egg-shells."

Obeah practices of the present day seem similar to those of a hundred years ago, and information about them has been kindly supplied to me by Mr. Thomas, Inspector Jamaica Constabulary, and gleaned from his interesting pamphlet, *Something about Obeah*. In addition to the law of 1760, another law for the suppression of Obeah was passed in 1845, which gave to the executive authorities very comprehensive powers to deal, not only with the Obeah-men themselves, but also with those who sought their services. This Act was further amended, and the powers increased. Under these Acts, prosecutions are brought up to the present day. So the fangs of the Obeah-man have been drawn, and cases of murder are rare; but he still exercises an evil and wide-spreading influence, and the difficulty of getting evidence against them is extreme:—"A strong man will turn the colour of

ashes, and sweat will run down his cheeks, while in the witness-box, having the evidence wrested from him piece by piece, and having constantly to be ordered to look at the bench instead of at the Obeah-man at the bar fixing him with a stony stare."

Professional Obeah-men may be divided into two classes. First, the grossly ignorant, generally an African by birth or parentage, who firmly believes in the art which he professes ; he usually has a "wall eye", or a "sore foot", or some deformity, and is miserably poor, to outward appearance ; and his fee is small, but he does a good trade. The second class of Obeah-man is often of strikingly good physique, respectable appearance, and always decently dressed. He does more in the "duppy-catching" line, and does not accept a small fee ; and generally has too much intelligence to believe in the efficacy of his charms, his motives for adopting the calling being the ease with which it earns for him an ample competence, and the facilities it affords him for gratifying his animal passions, debauchery being the principal feature of his ceremonial. Of that ceremonial little is really known, and the orgies on grand occasions are said to be beyond description, and any white man venturing to intrude on them would do so at the peril of his life. "Duppy-catching" finds a great many votaries. A child suffers from epileptic fits, a woman is barren, or a man has an incurable ulcer ; the "duppy-catcher" is consulted, and they are told so-and-so has "set a duppy" on them, which he, for a consideration, undertakes to catch. A night is fixed for the operation, rum is provided, perhaps a white cock is killed (one of the breed known as "senseh"), feasting, drinking, and drumming, with occasional intervals of manipulation of the body of the patient, continue all night, and, if successful, the duppy is caught, enclosed in a bottle, taken away, and buried.

This little Obeah figure was brought to England in 1888 by Com. Hastings, R.N., and had been taken from a negro named Alexander Ellis, who was arrested in

Morant Bay, Jamaica May 1887. The police had suspected him of being an Obeah-man, and his possession of this little figure proved it. Ellis was tried on the 11th May before N. S. Haughton, Esq., acting stipendiary magistrate, under a local statute which renders any person,



“being by habit or repute an Obeah- or Myal-man”, who is found in possession of charms, liable to imprisonment for two months with hard labour. Ellis was convicted, and sentenced to fifteen days’ imprisonment. The figure was regarded as a particularly powerful and evil Obeah,

and no negro would willingly touch it, or be in the room with it. It is decorated with "senseh" fowls' feathers. The figure was sent out again to Jamaica, to form part of Mr. Thomas's collection of Obeah-charms at the Jamaica Exhibition, where at first it proved an attraction, and was described, outside the building, as "Amphitrite, the living Obeah"; but, after a short time (ten days or so), the Executive Committee requested it might be removed, as they considered it an "undesirable exhibit"—a recognition, no doubt, of its malign influences, which, fortunately, since its return to England, it no longer exerts.

MAY ROBINSON.

EXAMPLES OF OBEAH CHARMS SEIZED IN POSSESSION OF
VARIOUS OBEAH-MEN.

1. Horn of a young antelope, filled with snake and alligator fat, and a jegga, or small shell, with a threepenny-piece on top.
2. A number of blood-stained pieces of calabash strung together, called a "jeggeh".
3. A bag containing pieces of horse-shoe nails and broken bottle.
4. Phial containing quicksilver, the cork stuck with pins.
5. Packet containing myrrh, grey human hair, bladder, assa-fœtida, and herb roots.
6. Doll's head, bandaged with black cloth.

II.—SOME EAST INDIAN OBEAHS.

The Nilgiri mountains, in the south of the Madras Presidency, near the Western or Malabar Coast, have long been interesting to the antiquary and anthropologist as abounding in cairns and megalithic remains, and the abode of that remarkable picturesque race, the Todas, and other peculiar hill-tribes. They include a lofty and extensive table-land, with forest-clad sides descending steeply to the plains below. In 1849 I was for some time on these mountains

and made frequent excursions amidst their ridges and valleys in search of game, but always with an eye to any prehistoric remains I might meet with.

When at the delightful station of Coonoor, near the southern range of the plateau, and inquiring after cairns and the like, I was told by a Toda that something of the kind existed near his mand or village. So setting forth one morning, crossing a great ravine, and ascending the other side, I reached a cleft between two peaks, where the Toda met and guided me by an extremely steep and difficult track for fully 1,000 feet down to a secluded hollow, where on three sides the slopes descended precipitously, enclosing a small platform in front of which the mountain-side fell steeply to the low country. On the middle of the platform stood a large cromlech, or rather row of cromlechs, forming five compartments: three large ones in the centre, of equal height, covered with overlapping capstones, closed in with upright slabs at the back, with the front or southern side open, and a much smaller cromlech at each end. A man could easily have sat inside the central compartments, on the supporting slabs of which some indistinct figures were rudely carved, and in the middle partition lay a polished piece of the leg-bone of the large deer known as the elk or sambur, apparently much hacked with a knife.

I had some of the hill-people with me, and whilst examining this curious structure I noticed they all stood aloof, and on telling them to bring me out the leg-bone, all shrank back, looking aghast. I then found out that the hollow and cromlech were the haunt and abode of the most dreaded and malignant of the hill-deities, who was believed to be represented by that bone, which carried her power, and any meddling with it would be resented.

The bone had been laid there by the Kurumbars, a half-savage dwarfish race, few in number and seldom to be seen, inhabiting the thick, feverish jungles on the sides of the range, where only they can live. They seem to be a

remnant of the primitive possessors of the plains, driven thence at some unknown period by waves of invasion to the almost inaccessible jungle fastnesses. The tradition of them still survives, and all over the low country circles of stones and entrenched mounds are popularly called Kurumbar forts.

The few communities existing in the jungles are extremely shy, shunning intercourse with the people cultivating the table-land, who, whilst hating, hold them in great awe as witches and enchanters having an understanding and influence with the malevolent village deities. Yet at the beginning of the cultivating season one of this despised race must be called from his jungle habitation and guide the plough that turns the first furrow, and also be present at the initiation of some other village ceremonials. One of these Kurumbas was believed to have placed the bone in the cromlech, commissioned by the evil demon of the spot, who had invested it with her power. On certain occasions deputations from the villages on the plateau above came down and laid flowers, rice, and turmeric before it. After all this I said no more to the Hindu villagers with me, but turned to a Mussulman shikarri, who carried my gun, and told him to take up the bone; but he too shuffled uneasily and hung back; so I said to him, "Why, Cassim Sahib, you a true believer, are you afraid of these idolators' devils?" He answered, "True, Sahib, these are idolatrous pigs, and their shaitans accursed; but this shaitan is most spiteful, something bad might happen."

I record this incident as showing how the superstitious ideas of one tribe may infect others of a vehemently antagonistic race and creed. The only man who seemed careless of the *genius loci* was my Toda guide, who stood apart, wrapt toga-wise in his mantle, almost gigantic in stature, looking scornfully on the others. He and his tribe, of unknown origin, immemorially masters of the Nilgeris, acknowledged as such by the other hill-races, have their own gods and worship, and care nothing for other deities.

I proceeded onwards; most of the people with me hurrying on in advance to escape from that spot of ill-omen. I had, however, a strong wish to get that magic bone, and some days after opened negotiations with my Toda friend, who, without many words or express agreement, signified that it might be brought for a consideration—I suspect, too, with some secret feeling of contempt. In effect, a few days after, he met me mysteriously, and produced the bone from under his mantle. I heard no more at the time, but, to end the story, some few years after I again visited the spot, and found the curious cromlech all thrown down, broken and scattered, the work, I am afraid, of European planters, who had been opening a coffee estate in a neighbouring forest. The bone now on the table seems in the days of its power to have been analogous to the West Indian and African Obeahs.

Human bones, too, are often used in the Madras districts to form “a spell of powerful trouble” still more resembling Obeahs: a bone must be taken from a native burial-ground, where skulls and bones are always lying about, and the man who desires to kill or injure his enemy must take it by night to some lonely spot, and, holding it in his right hand and his chain of rudrāksha beads (*i.e.*, “tears of Siva”, a magical ornament) in his left, must recite a hundred times over the bone the powerful Malayāla Māntra or spell, “Om, Hrām! Hrām! Swine-faced goddess! seize him, seize him as a victim! Drink, drink his blood! Eat, eat his flesh! O image of imminent death, “Bhāgāvati of Malayāla, let his destruction be swift!” The bone thus charmed, thrown or hidden in an enemy’s house, will cause his death or ruin. Malayāla, or Malabar, is the land of sorcery and magic, and the most malevolent demons reside there. Seven of the most powerful and most dreaded have their abode in the Dharmastāla Temple, in a remote jungle tract of South Canara, where round stones, into which the power of the demons is transfused, are sold by the officials, carrying the power with them, and can be used, it is be-

lieved, with deadly effect. These stones, too, seem to rank with Obeahs. I can also adduce another instance of how an object used for evil purposes may become something very like an Obeah.

Whilst officiating as judge in the South Canara district a very cruel murder-case was brought before me, in which a man was proved to have been held down by three or four others and his throat cut or sawn through with a little sharp instrument five inches long—in fact, a steel spur, such as is attached to the heels of fighting-cocks. The charge was conclusively proved; and some time afterwards it came to my ears that the spur with which the murder (which was shown to have been prompted by jealousy) had been effected, had been abstracted from the Court, to which all things employed in murders were forfeited, and been deposited in a Bhūtastān or Devil-temple, and was being much resorted to with vows and offerings by persons stung by jealousy, especially women.

It should be explained here that, though the Brahmanical gods are known and revered, demon-worship is the popular country cultus in Southern India. The demons are malignant spirits or ghosts, commonly known as Bhūtas, and are very generally the ghosts of notorious bad characters, robbers, or men dreaded in life for violence and cruelty. Such persons after death become Bhūtas, as dreaded and malignant as they were in life. Those, too, who have met with violent deaths in any way are liable to become Bhūtas, and afflict their neighbourhoods; children are often named after them, as it is believed they will spare any who bear their names.

I remember an instance of a notorious leader of dacoits in the Trichinopoly and Madura borders, who had been guilty of great cruelties, and, after being at last captured and executed, the children born all over that country-side for many months were named after him, as it was believed he would surely become a most terrible Bhūta. So in the case just described, the murdered man was believed to

have become a Bhūta as ruthless as the manner of his death had been, and his power had been concentrated in the little instrument with which he had been so cruelly murdered. So people who wished to wreak revenge came and made offerings at the little shrine in which it had been placed, in the faith that some evil would thereby befall their enemies. I sent to bring the spur away, for it properly belonged to the Court, and so broke the spell.

I remember, too, a Brahman Munshi attached to me, an intelligent man, well versed in English, being in great perturbation at finding, on coming from his house in the morning, a parcel containing sticks, hair, and some other objects, wrapt in a plantain-leaf, laid upon his threshold. He believed it had been placed there by an enemy with incantations meant to bring misfortune or sickness on himself or family. That, too, appears to have been essentially an Obeah, and on the same lines as the curious clay object, laid not long ago with malicious intent upon the threshold of a house in Scotland, and now placed by Dr. Tylor in the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford.

M. J. WALHOUSE.
