

# The “Bad Business” of Obeah: Power, Authority, and the Politics of Slave Culture in the British Caribbean

Randy M. Browne

WHEN the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, a riverside coffee plantation in Berbice (in present-day Guyana), saw Madalon’s bloodied, bruised body early one morning in August 1821, they knew that if knowledge about what had happened spread, their own lives might be in danger (Figure 1). Yet they were confident that others on the plantation of more than 170 slaves shared their interest in keeping the cause of the enslaved woman’s death a secret. As the workday began, the drivers ordered a small group of men to hide the body and then told manager J. Helmers that Madalon had run away. While the manager initiated the search for Madalon, news of her disappearance spread. Within hours a note had reached the nearby estate where her husband lived. He traveled to Madalon’s plantation to try to find out what had happened. But no one would tell him what they knew. Indeed, for more than a month the people of Op Hoop van Beter kept their secrets. Eventually, however, militia officer and planter William Sterk caught wind of a rumor that Madalon had been killed during a clandestine obeah ritual. Tracing the rumor to its source led Sterk to a slave named Vigilant, who reported that “Madalon was killed by the directions of a negro, named Willem . . . on an occasion of his having danced the Mousckie dance,” an illegal ritual also known as the Minje Mama or Water Mama dance.<sup>1</sup>

Randy M. Browne is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Triangle Early American History Seminar, Durham, N.C., Apr. 24, 2009; at the 33d Annual Society for Caribbean Studies Conference, Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, Hull, Eng., July 1–3, 2009; and at the 125th Annual American Historical Association Meeting, Boston, Mass., Jan. 6–9, 2011. Financial support for researching this essay was provided by the Jacob K. Javits Foundation, Harvard University’s International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, and the American Historical Association. The author wishes to thank Trevor Burnard, Christopher Cameron, Peter A. Coclanis, Richard Drayton, Laurent Dubois, Kathleen DuVal, Bronwen Everill, Lisa A. Lindsay, Christina Mobley, Philip D. Morgan, John Wood Sweet, Heather Andrea Williams, Jason R. Young, and the anonymous readers for the *William and Mary Quarterly* for their valuable comments, suggestions, and advice.

<sup>1</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice, for the Crime of Obeah and Murder: Return to an Address to His Majesty, by The Honorable House of Commons, dated 29th of July 1822; for,*

*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 68, no. 3, July 2011  
DOI: 10.5309/willmaryquar.68.3.0451

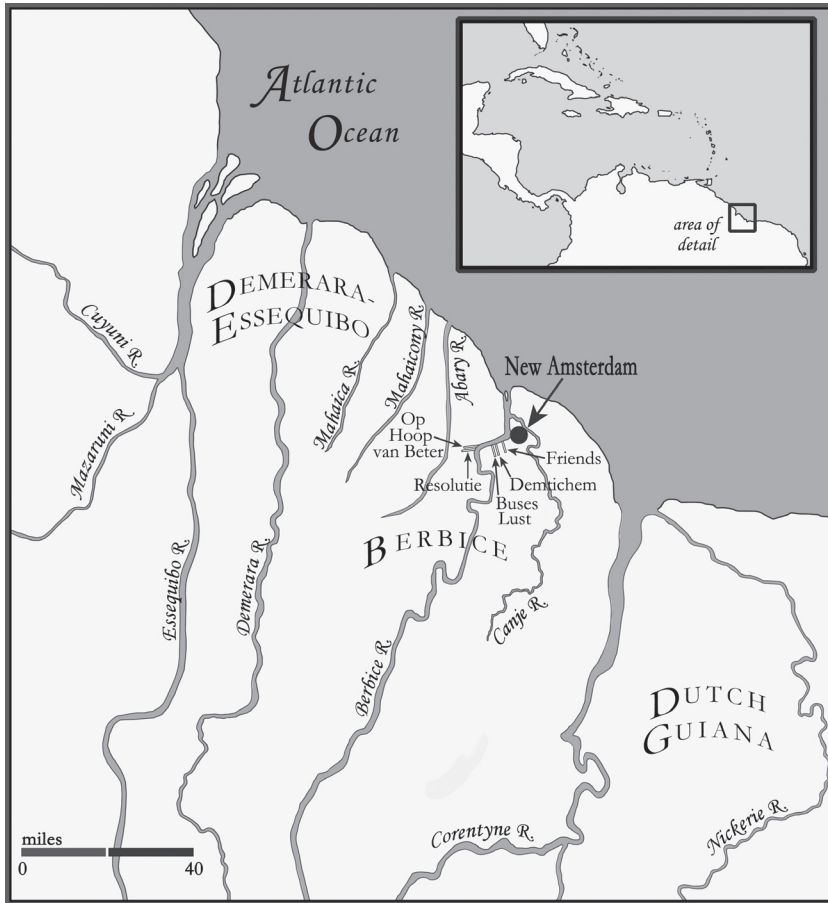


FIGURE I

Berbice and neighboring colonies, ca. 1820. Drawn by Rebecca Wrenn. A color version of this map is available: <http://jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.68.3.0451/>.

*Copy of any Information which may have been received concerning the Trial of a Slave, for the Crime of Obeah, in the Colony of Berbice*, British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons ([London], 1823), 13–14 (quotation, 13), 23. Vigilant lived on a plantation adjacent to Op Hoop van Beter. An 1819 slave registration return listed 172 enslaved people (73 Africans and 99 Creoles) on Op Hoop van Beter. See “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter, Situate on the West Bank of the River Berbice, the property of Pieter Elias Charbon of Amsterdam,” Feb. 1, 1819, Treasury (T) 71/438, pp. 119–24, British National Archives, Kew, Eng. In 1819 some twenty-three thousand enslaved people lived in Berbice, with Africans outnumbering Creoles 54 percent to 46 percent. See J. H. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice, 1819 to 1827” (Ph.D. diss., University of Canterbury, 2002), 23–24, 324.

Vigilant's indiscretion set in motion a relentless investigation into Madalon's murder and the practice of obeah—an Afro-Caribbean complex of spiritual healing, harming, and divination—on the estate.<sup>2</sup> Within hours Sterk apprehended Willem and took him two miles downriver to the New Amsterdam office of the fiscal, the colony's judicial authority. But fiscal Michael Samuel Bennett was not content with merely identifying Madalon's murderer. He was determined to uncover detailed information about the nature of the rituals that led to her death and about the people who participated in them. Over several months the fiscal interrogated some two dozen witnesses, many of them slaves who lived on or near Op Hoop van Beter. Finally, more than five months after Madalon's death, he brought formal charges against Willem and a few others, not only for Madalon's murder but also for facilitating the Minje Mama dance (a capital crime). Meanwhile onlookers such as the London Missionary Society's John Wray, who lived in New Amsterdam and saw obeah as an obstacle to converting slaves, conducted their own informal investigations and commented on the case in letters sent across the Atlantic. Two years before Madalon's death, in 1819, the fiscal had prosecuted a similar case against an enslaved man named Hans "on charge of Obiah" after he, like Willem, had organized the Minje Mama dance on a plantation not far from Op Hoop van Beter.<sup>3</sup> The fiscal dutifully

<sup>2</sup> Obeah was "the catchall term used to describe a complex of shamanistic practices derived from various parts of Africa and conducted by ritual specialists working largely outside of formal institutions." See Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 145. On the etymology of obeah, see Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby, "On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 22, no. 2 (August 2001): 87–100. On the evolution of obeah as a legal category and the challenges of defining it, see Diana Paton, "Obeah Acts: Producing and Policing the Boundaries of Religion in the Caribbean," *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009): 1–18.

<sup>3</sup> "Complaint against the negro Hans . . . on charge of Obiah," June 17, 1819, Colonial Office 116/138, pp. 60–63, National Archives (quotation). Fiscal Michael Samuel Bennett was also a slaveholder and part owner of two sugar plantations. See Alvin O. Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803–1831* (Kingston, Jamaica, 2003), 35; Gordon Eton Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture in Hydrologic Plantation Enterprises: A Study of Slavery in the British Colony of Berbice (Guyana)" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 2004), 54. On the prohibition of obeah in Berbice, see "Proclamation of the Governor and Court of Policy Against the Practice of 'Obeah,' 2 Apr. 1810," in Thompson, *A Documentary History of Slavery in Berbice, 1796–1834* (Georgetown, Guyana, 2002), 149. According to missionary John Wray, the death penalty for practicing obeah was "founded on the Jewish Law Exo[dus] 22.18." See Wray to William Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives, West Indies, B. Guiana-Berbice, Incoming Letters, box 1A, School for Oriental and African Studies, London, Eng. (Exodus 22:18 reads, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.") See also Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Guyana, 1580–1803* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1987), 132, 136. For Wray's observations on Willem's trial, see Wray to William A. Hankey, Treasurer of the London Missionary Society, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives, West Indies, B. Guiana-Berbice, Incoming Letters, box 1A, School for Oriental and African Studies.

sent records of both investigations to the Colonial Office in Britain, and Parliament published the proceedings of Willem's trial in 1823.<sup>4</sup>

We know about the rituals Willem and Hans conducted because early-nineteenth-century Berbice, a colony Britain had recently acquired from the Dutch, was an unusually well-documented plantation society. Under pressure from the imperial government and mounting antislavery agitation following the 1807 Abolition Act, crown colonies such as Berbice were forced to adopt new, purportedly more humane slave codes and new forms of record keeping, such as slave registration returns and plantation punishment logs. These kinds of surveillance were designed, in part, to help ameliorate slavery by more closely monitoring the treatment of slaves and to begin the shift, however gradually, toward emancipation. This process resulted in an explosion in the quantity and quality of documentation produced throughout the British Caribbean. Moreover, when the British seized Berbice from the Dutch, who had colonized the Guianas in the seventeenth century, they left much of the colony's legal and administrative structure intact, including the office of the fiscal. The presence of this office distinguished Berbice from most other Anglo-American slave societies and led to the production of a unique set of legal records that, unlike those from other Caribbean slave courts, included detailed testimony from managers, overseers, and enslaved people. Indeed these documents constitute the only large body of slave testimony in British America and present exciting opportunities, not the least of which is the possibility of seeing obeah and the Minje Mama dance, if not through the eyes of enslaved people themselves, then over their shoulders.<sup>5</sup>

THE NEED TO APPROACH OBEAH from the bottom up—to listen carefully to slaves' testimony—is particularly acute because Europeans have played

<sup>4</sup> These cases have also been addressed by several historians, including B. W. Higman, "Terms for Kin in the British West Indian Slave Community: Differing Perceptions of Masters and Slaves," in *Kinship Ideology and Practice in Latin America*, ed. Raymond T. Smith (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), 59–84, esp. 66–70; Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana, Ill., 1992), 180–81; Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994), 107–13; Lean, "Secret Lives of Slaves," 238–43; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 181–82, 197–200; Juanita De Barros, "'Setting Things Right': Medicine and Magic in British Guiana, 1803–38," *Slavery and Abolition* 25, no. 1 (April 2004): 28–50; Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture," 334–55.

<sup>5</sup> For amelioration, see J. R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750–1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford, 1988); Robert E. Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790–1833* (New York, 1995); Mary Turner, "'The 11 O'Clock Flog': Women, Work, and Labour Law in the British Caribbean," in *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora* (New York, 2002), 249–72; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 36–44; Gill, "Labor, Material

a central role in shaping historians' view of obeah for more than two centuries. Indeed historians' overriding interest in approaching obeah as either resistance or evidence of African cultural continuities can be traced back to British interpretations of obeah during the eighteenth century.

Until Tacky's Rebellion, a massive 1760–61 Jamaican slave revolt planned with the help of obeah practitioners, slaveholders and other European colonists largely ignored obeah and saw African cultural practices as little more than evidence of Africans' supposed primitivism or heathenism. In the decades after Tacky's Rebellion, however, British writers began to pay greater attention to obeah and associate it with slave revolt. By the late eighteenth century, partially in response to anxieties tied to the Haitian Revolution, a Romantic fascination and even sympathy with the figure of the mysterious obeahman, depicted as a sort of African noble savage or rebellious martyr, emerged in British literature and drama.<sup>6</sup> Colonials, meanwhile, had come to view obeah—which they usually defined as “pretending to have communication with the devil” or “assuming the art of witchcraft”—with alarm and outlawed its practice throughout the West Indies, beginning with the 1760 Jamaican “Act to Remedy the Evils Arising

---

Welfare, and Culture,” 51–67. The British took control of Berbice (and neighboring Demerara-Essequibo) in the early nineteenth century. The two colonies became jointly administered in 1831 as British Guiana, which achieved its independence as the Cooperative Republic of Guyana in 1966. For Berbice under Dutch rule, see Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment*; Marjoleine Kars, “Policing and Transgressing Borders: Soldiers, Slave Rebels, and the Early Modern Atlantic,” *New West Indian Guide* 83, nos. 3–4 (2009): 191–217. For the fiscal's role, see John Lean and Trevor Burnard, “Hearing Slave Voices: The Fiscal's Reports of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo,” *Archives* 27, no. 107 (October 2002): 120–33; Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 10–48. I borrow the “over the shoulder” metaphor from Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 149. See also Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 125–39; Paton, *Small Axe* 28: 8. Tacky's Rebellion was the major turning point in British attitudes toward obeah, but it was not the first—or the last—revolt connected to it. In 1736, for example, Quawcoo, an “Old Oby Man” and “Wizard,” helped instigate a rebellion on Antigua. See David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore, 1985), 246–47 (quotations, 246). Three-Fingered Jack, who led a Jamaican rebellion in 1780, was also rumored to be an obeah man. See Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 150. For obeah in British literature and drama, see William Earle, *Obi; Or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack*, ed. Srinivas Aravamudan (Peterborough, Ont., 2005); Alan Richardson, “Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797–1807,” *Studies in Romanticism* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 3–28; Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 152–56. Fictional portrayals of obeah include James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane: A Poem. In Four Books. With Notes* (London, 1764); Earle, *Obi; Or, The History of Three-fingered Jack. In a Series of Letters From a Resident in Jamaica to his Friend in England* (London, 1800); John Fawcett, *Obi; Or, Three-Finger'd Jack: A Serio-Pantomime, in Two Acts* (London, 1800); Maria Edgeworth, “The Grateful Negro,” in *Popular Tales* (London, 1804), 1: 171–210; *Hamel, the Obeah Man* (London, 1827).

from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves.”<sup>7</sup> In the name of curbing slave unrest, colonial courts routinely sentenced suspected obeah practitioners to deportation or, in more extreme cases, execution.<sup>8</sup>

When the British acquired Berbice, they followed this pattern, passing laws against the “evil” that was obeah in 1801 and 1810.<sup>9</sup> A weak missionary presence combined with massive importation of African captives, however, allowed obeah and other non-Christian spiritual and cultural practices to flourish in the West Indies well into the nineteenth century, as evidenced by continued efforts to curb the practice, such as the 1819 Barbados “Act for the Better Prevention of the Practice of Obeah.”<sup>10</sup> By the 1820s one of several dozen offenses regularly recorded in Berbice’s punishment record books—records the colonial government required to better document slave behavior and punishment—was “practising obeah.”<sup>11</sup> Enslaved people in Berbice and elsewhere continued to use obeah despite British efforts to eradicate the practice, as the events on Op Hoop van Beter made clear.

As rich as Willem’s trial record is, it is also problematic, partly because some witnesses testified under duress. Early in the fiscal’s investigation, Lieutenant Governor Henry Beard granted him the “authority to inflict such punishment as the law will admit of on such persons who be found prevaricating, and evincing a disposition to elude and frustrate the ends of justice,” and the trial record contains hints of the kinds of coercion that

<sup>7</sup> Paton, *Small Axe* 28: 4–5 (quotations, 4).

<sup>8</sup> According to Edward Long, the landmark 1760 Jamaican anti-obeah law stated that “*Obeiah-men*, pretended conjurors, or priests, upon conviction before two justices and three freeholders of their practicing as such, [were] to suffer death, or transportation, at the discretion of the court.” See Long, *The History of Jamaica* (London, 1774), 2: 489. By emancipation, nearly all British Caribbean colonies had enacted laws against obeah, many of which remained on the books well into the twentieth century. See Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York, 2005), 36–40, 44–46, 76–79; Diana Paton, “Interpreting Spiritual Power in the Era of the Slave Trade: ‘Obeah,’ ‘Poisoning,’ and ‘Witchcraft’ in the Caribbean” (paper, “The bloody Writing is for ever torn’: Domestic and International Consequences of the First Governmental Efforts to Abolish the Atlantic Slave Trade,” Aug. 8–12, 2007, Accra and Elmina, Ghana), 7; Paton, *Small Axe* 28: 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> “Proclamation . . . Against the Practice of ‘Obeah,’” in Thompson, *Documentary History of Slavery in Berbice*, 149 (quotation); Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>10</sup> “Act for the Better Prevention of the Practice of Obeah,” Barbados, 1819, CO 30/20, no. 383, National Archives. The missionary presence was particularly weak in Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, and planter opposition was significant. See Raymond T. Smith, “Religion in the Formation of West Indian Society,” in *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Martin Kilson and Robert Rotberg (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 312–42; Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment*, 133–34; Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 3–37; Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 331.

<sup>11</sup> Semiannual punishment record books can be found in the records of the Berbice Fiscals and Protectors of Slaves, CO 116/139–53, National Archives.

might have been employed to gather evidence.<sup>12</sup> As historians of slavery who have used Latin American Inquisition records have shown, we must be very cautious when dealing with such testimony; people often gave false confessions or made untrue accusations against others, and some witnesses carefully crafted their narratives in hopes of avoiding or mitigating punishment. Studies based on such records, however, have also been enormously fruitful in uncovering the lives and cosmologies of people who left behind few written records of their own.<sup>13</sup>

Testimony preserved in the written record is also the product of translation, not a literal transcription of slaves' speech. Because of the colony's Dutch heritage, many enslaved people there spoke a creole language known as Berbice Dutch. As John Wray observed when he visited Op Hoop van Beter soon after Willem's trial, he had to communicate with the people there "in Creole Dutch" because they did "not understand English."<sup>14</sup> The fiscal therefore relied on an "interpreter in the English and Creole languages" during his investigation, so some testimony must have passed through several stages of translation and alteration before being committed to the final written record.<sup>15</sup> But the presence of certain creole words and phrases as well as the frequent use of the first person in these records also suggest that legal secretaries attempted to record testimony precisely. And the African-derived terms in Berbice Dutch have allowed linguists and historians to explore the regional origins of African captives taken to Berbice with unusual specificity.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, what the fiscal and other British colonials

<sup>12</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 18. See for example the following description of the initial interrogation of Baron, one of the enslaved men on the estate, who witnessed the Minje Mama dance and who was ordered to bury Madalon's body after her death: "On the negro Baron first being called he refused to give a decisive answer to any question that was asked. After Mr. Sterk striking him on the side of the head he said he would tell him the whole truth." *Ibid.*, 18–21 (quotation, 19). The trial record makes no further mention of torture. More often the fiscal used witnesses against one another. Frederick, for example, only testified "after being expostulated with by the witness Vigilant, who pressed him to relate the truth, as he was really acquainted with the circumstances." *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Kathryn Joy McKnight, "En su tierra lo aprendió': An African *Curandero's* Defense before the Cartagena Inquisition," *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (June 2003): 63–84; James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003); Joan Cameron Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>15</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Lean, "Secret Lives of Slaves," 30–33. Linguistic analyses of Berbice Dutch suggest that a majority of the early generations of African captives brought to Berbice were Ijo speakers from the Niger River delta and the Bight of Biafra (present-day Nigeria and Cameroon). See Johannes Potsma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (New York, 1990), 106–8; Ian Robertson, "The Ijo Element in Berbice Dutch and the

saw as a problem of translation has allowed some scholars to get even closer to slaves' voices.

Using these records effectively and responsibly involves interrogating the possible motivations of all witnesses and taking seriously the possibility that many people revealed to the fiscal less—and sometimes more—than they knew. Testimony must also be read with an eye toward patterns of questioning and patterned responses, and with close attention to the ways that some witnesses' stories changed over time and in response to the testimony of other witnesses. Fortunately, much of the information gained from these documents regarding obeah, the Minje Mama dance, and, more generally, the cosmology of enslaved African and Afro-Caribbean peoples can also be triangulated with other sources, ranging from missionary records and planters' journals to contemporary ethnographic and anthropological scholarship.

LISTENING CAREFULLY to the slaves' voices preserved in the records generated when the fiscal prosecuted Willem and Hans furnishes an opportunity to reconsider the role that obeah and its practitioners played in slaves' lives and the internal politics of slave communities from a fresh perspective. To date, much scholarship on obeah has emphasized its varied African roots or antecedents, its connections to slave rebellion or resistance, and especially its role in healing and preventing misfortune.<sup>17</sup> Much of this work has been illuminating, but it has also contributed to an underappreciation of the complicated politics of obeah, the dangers and violence associated with certain obeah practices, and the ways that obeah practitioners sought to establish and maintain their authority.

---

Pidginization/Creolization Process," in *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties*, ed. Salikoko S. Mufwene with Nancy Condon (Athens, Ga., 1993), 296–316; Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture," 318–22.

<sup>17</sup> The literature on obeah in the preemancipation Caribbean is vast, but some of the most influential work has been done by Kenneth M. Bilby and Jerome S. Handler. See, for example, Bilby and Handler, "Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life," *Journal of Caribbean History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 153–83. Bilby and Handler have argued that obeah was "primarily concerned with divination . . . healing and bringing good fortune, and protection from harm" and that "the supernatural/spiritual force (or forces) that the obeah practitioner attempted to control or guide was essentially neutral, but was largely directed toward what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals." *Ibid.*, 154 ("primarily concerned"), 155 ("supernatural/spiritual force"). Historians have also, however, acknowledged obeah's antisocial uses and the conflicts and divisions that it could cause among enslaved people. See for example Michael Mullin's argument that "obeah both fed and contributed to the same passions and allegiances that fueled the other major features of the plantation's political culture—ethnic rivalry and contests over turf. Together these features frustrated organized resistance in the countryside by keeping slaves divided, local in outlook, and often demoralized" (Mullin, *Africa in America*, 183).



Obeah helped enslaved people solve many problems, but it could also be remarkably violent and dangerous. The records from Berbice reveal that the Minje Mama dance, for instance, featured whippings, beatings, and other forms of physical violence, much of it directed against people who interfered with the dance or otherwise challenged obeah practitioners. And sometimes, as the slaves on Op Hoop van Beter learned, obeah proved fatal. The Minje Mama dance and other healing practices—even when they represented continuity with African cosmologies—came to include extreme violence when reinterpreted in the plantation environments of the Americas, where physical violence was central to the exercise of power.

The evidence from Berbice also reveals that obeah was an ambivalent and ambiguous practice: it could be used to heal or to harm, to preserve life or to destroy it, and was thus both respected and feared by slaves.<sup>18</sup> The drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, for example, thought that Madalon had used obeah to sicken and kill other slaves. To counteract her powers, they called in another obeah specialist, Willem, who they thought could solve their problems. The rituals Willem organized, however, resulted in much bloodshed, intensified social divisions on the plantation, and created a new set of problems for the very people he was supposed to help. Obeah practitioners such as Willem and Hans were powerful, trusted healers, but they were also dangerous—and unpredictable.

These observations supply compelling reasons for approaching obeah in Berbice with a focus on questions of power and authority. How did obeah practitioners construct their authority? How did they get others to obey them and accept the risks associated with obeah? And what happened when they lost the respect or allegiance of those followers? Focusing on a particular obeah ritual—the Minje Mama dance—can help answer these questions while exploring how obeah practitioners fashioned themselves as spiritual and political leaders, how others responded to their use of obeah and especially

<sup>18</sup> Peter Geschiere has made a similar argument for the ambiguity of witchcraft—which could be a constructive or a destructive force—and its political dimensions in late-twentieth-century West Africa (Cameroon) in Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, trans. Geschiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville, Va., 1997), 196–99, 219. “Healers,” Geschiere explains, “are always highly ambivalent figures: they can only heal because they have killed. One is, in the end, never sure that healers will use their redoubtable forces only to cure.” *Ibid.*, 196. Obeah practitioners also provoked a range of reactions among enslaved people, as Europeans recognized. A 1791 report to the House of Commons on Jamaican obeah, for instance, explained that “Negroes in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor [obeah practitioners].” In Vincent Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority: The Power of the Supernatural in Jamaican Slave Society,” in *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, ed. Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp (Athens, Ga., 2006), 179–210 (quotation, 191). See also Jerome S. Handler, “Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, circa 1650 to 1834,” *New West Indian Guide* 74, nos. 1–2 (2000): 57–90, esp. 78; Bilby and Handler, *Journal of Caribbean History* 38: 160.

their frequent recourse to violence and intimidation, and how these men dealt with challenges to their authority. As Willem and Hans knew, their authority was contested, contingent, and controversial. Above all, it rested on demonstrable success in practicing their craft.

For the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, the Minje Mama dance was a last resort. For weeks or months, they watched other slaves become incurably sick, and no one seemed to know why. It was the end of the long rainy season—the time of year when illness typically peaked in the swampy environments where slaves lived and died—but things seemed worse than normal. By early August the death toll was still rising, and the medical treatment slaves encountered in the estate “hospital” proved futile. As the epidemic worsened, some people began to suspect that a malevolent spiritual force was the culprit. They needed someone with the requisite knowledge to identify and neutralize whatever it was that had sickened and killed their friends, kin, and neighbors, and they concluded that Anglo-American doctors were not up to the task. Lead drivers Primo and Mey realized they needed someone who could “put the estate to rights” or “bring things on the estate to order,” as they understood it, by devising a solution to what they saw as a spiritual, not epidemiological, crisis.<sup>19</sup>

The drivers might have been motivated by compassion, but it is also likely that their desire to restore the spiritual and social order on the plantation stemmed from an urgent wish to maintain their own coveted positions of authority and respect. If people continued to die, there was a good chance that they might be held accountable. The irony, of course, was that the drivers sought to reinforce a plantation regime that benefited them even as it enslaved them by turning to an obeahman—an unsanctioned authority—

<sup>19</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 22. Primo was “head driver” and Mey was “second driver.” *Ibid.*, 9 (quotations), 25. Contemporary observers believed Berbice and its neighboring colonies to be among the worst disease environments in the Caribbean, and epidemics were relatively common. See B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984), 262–72; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 20–21; Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 26, 239. Anglo-American doctors—trained in the humoral or miasmatic theories of medicine—often employed treatments such as bloodletting, purging, and blistering, which harmed their patients more than they helped them. Enslaved people were understandably more likely to rely on their own healers. See Higman, *Slave Populations*, 261, 272; Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge, 1985), 70, 73, 320, 330; Handler, *New West Indian Guide* 74: 58–60. Enslaved people thought European medicine was particularly ineffective when it came to people who had fallen victim to obeah, as the lyrics of a so-called “negro song”—attributed to a wife whose husband had been “Obeahed” by another woman and described by Jamaican planter Matthew Gregory “Monk” Lewis—suggest: “Doctor no do you good. When neger fall into neger hands, buckra [white] doctor no do him good more.” See Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London, 1834), 253.

and his illicit knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Far from threatening the slave system, as one might assume, obeah in this case was called on to preserve it.

Africans and their descendants in the Americas often suspected malevolent spiritual forces when sickness, death, or misfortune struck.<sup>21</sup> In the British Caribbean, even slaveholders knew that when someone died unexpectedly slaves often accused one another of using obeah. Bryan Edwards, a Jamaican planter in the late eighteenth century, observed, "When, at any time, sudden or untimely death overtakes any of their companions . . . they never fail to impute it to the malicious contrivances and diabolical arts of some practitioner in Obeah."<sup>22</sup> John Wray observed that slaves in Berbice "attribute[d] almost all their diseases to the Obeah-man or woman, and frequently also, the death of their friends; and [they] very frequently wore amulets to counteract their influence."<sup>23</sup>

Enslaved people went to obeah practitioners for help with an array of problems, but they also viewed these men and women—and the powers they wielded—with suspicion and fear. In 1822, when the slaves on Berbician plantation Friends became suspicious that Tobias had been "practising obeah on the estate," they went to the manager and pleaded with him to punish Tobias (see Figure 1). The attorney, manager, and overseer all agreed that Tobias was "a very bad character, and disliked by all the other negroes on the estate." They had Tobias put in the stocks and later "sold at public vendue, and not allowed to return to the plantation."<sup>24</sup> Similar tensions between an obeah practitioner and other slaves developed on Matthew Gregory "Monk" Lewis's Jamaican estate in 1816–18. In his journal Lewis frequently complained of his problems with "a reputed Obeah-man," Adam, who was "a most dangerous fellow, and the terror of all his companions, with whom he live[d] in a constant state of warfare." Adam "was accused [by other slaves] of being an Obeah-man," was "strongly suspected of having poisoned more than twelve negroes," and had

<sup>20</sup> Some drivers used obeah to enhance their authority. Vincent Brown, for example, observes that slave drivers buttressed their status by "presid[ing] over unsanctioned judiciaries" in which obeah often played a central role in determining guilt or innocence. See Brown, "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority," 197.

<sup>21</sup> Osei-Mensah Aborampah, "Out of the Same Bowl: Religious Beliefs and Practices in Akan Communities in Ghana and Jamaica," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana, Ill., 2005), 124–42, esp. 135–36; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 139; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (New York, 1992), 241–43.

<sup>22</sup> Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies in Two Volumes* (1794; repr., London, 1807), 2: 96.

<sup>23</sup> John Wray to Charles Bird, Aug. 25, 1829, Reports of Protectors of Slaves, CO 116/145, fols. 218–19, National Archives. See also Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture," 357–58.

<sup>24</sup> "Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negro Tobias, belonging to plantation Friends," Sept. 4, 1822, CO 116/138, pp. 132–33, National Archives.

also “threatened the lives of many of the best negroes.” By 1818 they had had enough: several “principal negroes” asked Lewis to remove Adam from the plantation, “as their lives were not safe while breathing the same air with Adam.”<sup>25</sup>

When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter decided to turn to Willem, they knew that bringing him to the plantation could help but would also expose them and other slaves to several dangers. Obeah and the Minje Mama dance were illegal, and the punishments were severe. And even if the drivers were able to avoid detection, the practice of obeah itself posed serious risks. Some obeah practices involved whippings, beatings, and other forms of violence that could prove more injurious than efficacious. And obeah practitioners themselves could be dangerous and violent. How, then, do we explain the drivers’ decision to turn to Willem despite the risks?

WILLEM WAS NO STRANGER to the people on Op Hoop van Beter. One of about one hundred slaves who lived on Buses Lust, a coffee plantation on the east bank of the Berbice River almost directly across from Op Hoop van Beter, Willem visited the plantation regularly and eventually developed a relationship with a woman, Johanna, who lived there (see Figure I). Born in Berbice at the end of the eighteenth century, Willem had developed a reputation as a healer by his twenties, an impressive feat for a relatively young man.<sup>26</sup> Several witnesses testified that Willem was known as “Attetta Sara,” “Monkesi Sara,” “the Minje Mama,” “God Almighty’s toboco,” and “a real Obiah man (Confou man)” — terms used in recognition of his authority.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 137 (“reputed Obeah-man”), 147 (“most dangerous fellow”), 350 (“was accused”), 352 (“threatened the lives”), 353 (“principal negroes”). When Lewis found “a considerable quantity of materials for the practice of Obeah” in Adam’s house, he had Adam “immediately committed to the gaol” and then brought him to a slave court where Adam was tried “for Obeah & having materials used in Obeah.” He was sentenced to be transported. *Ibid.*, 354 (“considerable quantity”), 237; “Slave Trials in the Parish of Westmoreland from 1st July 1814 to 30th June 1818,” Jamaica, Return of Trials of Slaves, 1814–1818, CO 137/147, fols. 25–29 (“for Obeah,” 27), National Archives. See also Mullin, *Africa in America*, 179–80.

<sup>26</sup> Willem was between twenty-one and twenty-three years old in 1819. See “Return of Slaves Attached to Plantation Buses Lust situate on the East Bank of the River Berbice,” T 71/438, pp. 65–58, National Archives.

<sup>27</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 22 (“Attetta”), 23 (“Monkesi”), 25–27 (“God Almighty’s,” 26, “Obiah man,” 25). “Attetta” was a variation on *taata* or *tata*, which meant father and was used among Afro-Caribbean people as a respectful form of address, and “Attetta Sara” meant messenger in Ijo. “Monkesi” might have been another name for the Minje Mama; some witnesses called the dance Willem organized the “Makisi” or “Mouskie” dance. See *Trial of a Slave*, 29 (“Makisi”), 13 (“Mouskie”). It is also possible that it was a variation on *miniksi*, Kongolese charms or fetishes. “Confou” was likely a corruption of *comfa*, a Guyanese dance that featured spirit possession, or the Twi term for spiritual healers, *komfo*. See Frederic G. Cassidy and Robert B. Le Page, eds., *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (1967; repr., Cambridge, 1980), 433; Higman, “Terms for Kin,” 69–70; Brian L. Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism:*

When Willem learned of the epidemic, he first tried to treat sick people individually. The healing strategies he employed—what might be called everyday obeah—were relatively benign when compared to collective rituals such as the Minje Mama dance. Willem first obtained the permission of those he treated. Cornelia, the estate cook, explained, “Willem . . . came on the estate and asked if we were sick, if so, he could cure us? I said perhaps he could cure us; and as I was sick, he took three twigs of the coconut tree, and struck me on the head, and told me to go and wash myself.” Willem “made her eyes turn,” a common description for spirit possession or a trance state. Afterward, Cornelia recalled, “she found herself much better, and [believed] that this had helped to cure her.” Fortuyn—who some witnesses claimed had brought Willem to the plantation—asked him to help his wife, who “had been two or three months with a sore on her foot.” Willem also visited sick children in the plantation hospital. He “came to the hospital,” one man explained, and “directed the children to be brought out,” where they “were washed by Willem, who took off two bits [coins] that were tied round the neck of one of them” as payment for his services.<sup>28</sup>

These efforts to treat individual symptoms, however, could only do so much. Willem and the drivers realized that because they faced a widespread problem, a more systematic—and much more dangerous—healing process was necessary. Willem needed to uncover the root cause of these different ailments if he was to put an end to the epidemic. It was time for the Minje Mama dance.

UNLIKE EVERYDAY OBEAH, the Minje Mama dance was a collective divination and healing ritual performed in moments of crisis. Also known as the Water Mama dance and by other names, it was designed to identify the source of *maleficium*, or harmful spiritual practice. Slaves throughout the Caribbean practiced variations of this ritual, which was often characterized by trance-induced dancing and spirit possession. Similar rituals or ceremonies have also been practiced for centuries in some parts of West Africa, where the spirit is known as Mami Wata.<sup>29</sup> This ritual’s primary goal in the

---

*Colonial Guyana, 1838–1900* (Montreal, Quebec, 1995), 138; Richard Allsopp, ed., *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (New York, 1996), 165; Monica Schuler, “Liberated Africans in Nineteenth-Century Guyana,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge, 2002), 346 n. 57; De Barros, *Slavery and Abolition* 25: 41–42; Gill, “Labor, Welfare, and Material Culture,” 351–52.

<sup>28</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 24 (“came on the estate,” “she found herself”), 22 (“made her eyes turn”), 26 (“had been two”), 28 (“came to the hospital”), 25; Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 332; “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24, National Archives.

<sup>29</sup> “Minje” was the Ijo word for water. See Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 330. For the Minje Mama dance, see Higman, “Terms for Kin,” 66; Gert Oostindie and Alex van Stipriaan, “Slavery and Slave Culture in a Hydraulic Society:

Caribbean was identification of the person responsible for harming others though the use of spiritual powers. It was thus extremely useful but also fraught with danger.

In the Guianas the Minje Mama dance was the tool of choice for identifying suspected obeah practitioners or poisoners. There was always the danger that an innocent participant or someone's friend or family member might be identified as the guilty party, which must have given some people pause before lending their support to this ritual. As early as the eighteenth century, British observers recognized the central role the Minje Mama dance played in slaves' efforts to combat sickness and misfortune. John Gabriel Stedman, who fought against the Maroons in Suriname in the 1770s, observed that enslaved people there worshipped the "*Watra Mama*," a powerful spirit they believed lived in the colony's rivers.<sup>30</sup>

Central to the *Watra Mama*'s authority was her reputation for helping those who worshipped her (for example, by locating poison) while harming or killing those who disobeyed her.<sup>31</sup> Stedman—who supplied one of the earliest written descriptions of a Minje Mama or *Watra Mama* ritual, which he knew as "*winty-play*, or the dance of the mermaid"—recognized the sway obeah practitioners had among their peers. He described a class of "*Locomen*, or pretended prophets, [who] find their interest in encouraging this superstition, by selling . . . *obias* or amulets." These "sage matrons" would dance

---

Suriname," in *Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery*, ed. Stephan Palmié (Knoxville, Tenn., 1995), 92; De Barros, *Slavery and Abolition* 25: 40. On Mami Wata, see Henry John Drewal, ed., *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington, Ind., 2008).

<sup>30</sup> J[ohn] G[abriel] Stedman, *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* . . . , 2d ed. (London, 1813), 2: 183. Written references to the Minje Mama dance in preemancipation Berbice are rare, probably because it was illegal and enslaved people tried to keep such dances a secret. There is scattered evidence, however, that the Minje Mama dance remained an important part of Afro-Berbician culture well into the nineteenth century. In 1834, for example, two persons were charged with dancing the "Makizie water or minji mama dance" at Plantation Waterloo. They stood accused of "pretending and feigning to have had an inspiration or revelation or intercourse with ghosts relative to poisoners or certain persons suspected of the crime of poisoning." See Prosecutions Book of the Court of Criminal Justice, Berbice, British Guiana, 1832–37, in Higman, "Terms for Kin," 66–67 ("Makizie," 66, "pretending," 67). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, missionary Charles Daniel Dance reported that people in British Guiana still performed the "water mamma" ritual. See Dance, *Chapters from a Guianese Log-Book* (Georgetown, Demerara, 1881), 78–79. For earlier references to the Minje Mama that compare the spirit to a mermaid, see Oostindie and Van Stipriaan, "Slavery and Slave Culture," 92–93. According to John Wray, enslaved people in Berbice also consulted the "Minggie or Water Mama (the Mermaid) whom they suppose resides in the River and Creeks of Berbice and who makes known to these Men who it is, that inflicts sickness on their children." Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>31</sup> Alex van Stipriaan, "The Ever-Changing Face of Watramama in Suriname: A Water Goddess in Creolization since the Seventeenth Century," in Drewal, *Sacred Waters*, 525–47, esp. 529.

and whirl around “in the middle of an assembly, with amazing rapidity, until they foam[ed] at the mouth, and drop[ped] down as convulsed,” possessed by the spirits. At these “extremely dangerous” meetings, which were “often practised in private places,” Stedman wrote, “whatever the prophetic orders to be done . . . is most sacredly performed by the surrounding multitude.”<sup>32</sup> Legislators in Suriname had outlawed “watermama and similar African dances” by the 1770s, and colonial officials in Berbice similarly found the Minje Mama dance threatening enough to go to the trouble of having the legal prohibition of the ritual publicly “read and explained to the gangs of different estates on the river” in the early nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

Documents generated during the criminal trial of an enslaved Kongolese healer named Hans, a fifty-six-year-old, half-blind field hand owned by the crown, supply a rare opportunity to see the Minje Mama dance from the bottom up. In 1819 Hans organized the dance on Plantation Denticchem, a coffee estate located across the river from Op Hoop van Beter (see Figure I). The drivers on the plantation decided to contact an obeah practitioner when a series of unexplained deaths confounded them. As one of the drivers explained, “so many deaths had occurred that he had sent for a man to put every thing to rights.” The driver “wished to have the bad people,” meaning those who had used obeah to harm others, “off the estate.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Stedman, *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition*, 2: 272–73 (“winty-play,” “in the middle,” 2: 273, “Locomen,” 2: 272, “sage matrons,” 2: 272–73). For *winti*, an Afro-Surinamese religion and healing tradition in which spirit possession plays an important role, see C. J. Wooding, *Winti: Een Afroamerikaanse godsdienst in Suriname: Een cultureel-historische analyse van de religieuze verschijnselen in de Para* (Meppel, Netherlands, 1972); Wooding, “Traditional Healing and Medicine in Winti: A Sociological Interpretation,” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 35–40; Henri J. M. Stephen, *Winti, Afro-Surinaamse Religie en Magische Rituelen in Suriname en Nederland* (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1983). The earliest known visual representation of a *winti* dance is Dutch artist Dirk Valkenburg’s painting *Slave Play on Dombi Plantation (Suriname)* (1707). Aspects of the Minje Mama dance as described by John Gabriel Stedman are similar to John K. Thornton’s description of spirit possession in Afro-Atlantic cultures: “In the case of human possession, a being from the other world would enter the medium’s body and speak with his or her voice . . . Typically possession would occur after the medium had fallen into a trance, for . . . the other world seems to have found it easiest to communicate with people in an unconscious state or an altered state of consciousness. Such a trance might be induced by drugs or hypnotic dancing, singing, or drumming.” See Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 243. The Minje Mama dance also resembles the ritual dance at the heart of *myal* or *myalism*, which was commonly associated with Jamaica. See Monica Schuler, “Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica,” in *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link*, ed. Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight (Baltimore, 1979), 65–79; De Barros, *Slavery and Abolition* 25: 40–41; Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*; Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 146–47.

<sup>33</sup> Van Stipriaan, “Ever-Changing Face of Watramama,” 527 (“watermama”); *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 42 (“read and explained”); Alex van Stipriaan, “Watramama/Mami Wata: Three Centuries of Creolization of a Water Spirit in West Africa, Suriname and Europe,” in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, ed. Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleishman (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2003), 323–37, esp. 327.

<sup>34</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, pp. 60–63 (quotations, 61). Among enslaved people in the Anglophone Caribbean, “bad” was often

Hans, like Willem, enjoyed a reputation as a skilled healer. “Negroes in general,” Hans boasted to John Wray, who interviewed him in jail after his arrest, “know that I possess the power of helping them if any thing is the matter with them and great numbers of negroes have applied to me and I have helped them.” It was this reputation that gave the people on Demtichem confidence in Hans’s abilities. “All the people and children got sick here,” the lead driver, January, explained, “and we know that in other places you have helped them and therefore we have sent for you.”<sup>35</sup>

When Hans arrived on the plantation, January explained to a large group gathered before his house that Hans had come “to put every thing to rights.” Hans first needed to identify the “bad” person in their midst. He asked the children to “point out the persons who administered poison [on] the estate,” and some people told him “they suspected there was poison in [estate carpenter] Frederick’s House.”<sup>36</sup> Hans then sacrificed a pullet, placed the feathers in the children’s hair, and washed them with a special mixture of water and grass. He then “began to sing a country song,” instructing everyone to “join in [the] chorus,” and demanded payment for his services.<sup>37</sup>

The next day Hans returned to continue the divination process. According to Venus, who participated in the dance, Hans declared that “he would pull off all the poison that was in the ground, which made the people on the estate die so suddenly.” Hans washed everyone present and “sang the dance called Walter [Water] Mamma dans.”<sup>38</sup> Hans made “all the negroes dance on one foot and clap their hands,” according to Wray, and some fell into a trance, possessed by the spirit of the Minje Mama. One man “became as tho’ he was crazy, jumping high up from the ground and throwing himself down.”<sup>39</sup> “My head began to turn,” Venus told the fiscal, “as if I were mad.” The plantation attorney thought “the minds of the negroes must have been greatly agitated, they having thrown themselves on the ground, biting the grass, tearing the earth with their hands, and conducting themselves like maniacs.”<sup>40</sup>

---

shorthand for “evil” or “obeah,” and to “do bad” meant to cause someone “to become incurably sick or mentally ill through the use of evil powers.” See Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English*, 64. The name of the plantation where Hans organized the Minje Mama dance is spelled differently in different sources—for example, Deutchem, Deutchien, or Duidichim—but I have elected to spell it Demtichem because that is how it is spelled in the fiscal’s record, the major source for Hans’s dance.

<sup>35</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>36</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 61 (“put every thing”); Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (“they suspected”).

<sup>37</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 61 (quotations).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62 (quotations).

<sup>39</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>40</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 62 (“My head”), 60 (“minds of the negroes”).



Though potentially useful, this was a dangerous, violent ritual. The slaves “that were the most turbulent,” Frederick recalled, “were flogged with the wild canes . . . by order of Hans, and recovered; others more furious, and not recovering from the stripes [lashes], Hans struck with a bamboo, and they immediately recovered.” According to Venus, Hans made sure that everyone was “flogged with the wild cane first; if not recovered he flogged them with a carracarra, and put guinea pepper in their eyes which he had chewed. All of this was done to me, but I could not recover . . . I could see and hear every thing, but was exactly as if I were crazy: I recovered a little after this last.”<sup>41</sup>

As the dance continued, the results it produced sparked conflict, both about the poisoner’s identity and about the extent of Hans’s powers. “Venus went into the middle of the circle being apparently crazy” and “throwing herself upon the ground and rolling about.” She then “burst out into Hysterical laughter and came up & struck [Frederick] again.”<sup>42</sup> “Coming up to [him, she] said, [he] was the bad man on the estate.” Venus told Frederick “that they want[ed] to remove [him]” from the plantation. She knew he was “the bad man” because she could “see it from the water that has been sprinkled over my face and eyes.” She “ran out of the circle and said ‘come, and I show you where the poison is hid,’” leading a group to Frederick’s house.<sup>43</sup>

At Frederick’s, Venus and the others “threw down two casks of water, broke down [the] kitchen and fowl-house, and dug up the earth with shovels,” Frederick explained. But they could not find the poison. Venus claimed that she had made a mistake, that she had meant to accuse another man, and asked to be allowed to “go to Hans . . . to get my eyes properly washed.” “No,” Frederick protested, “I have been accused, and must insist, as my house has been broken, that this business shall be found out, or I know what to do.”<sup>44</sup>

Frederick decided to tell the plantation overseer “that the negroes were breaking open his house, and digging up the ground, accusing him of being a poisoner.” He had good reason to fear what might happen if the others believed Venus. The overseer put an end to the search for the poison and placed the drivers in the stocks, and the plantation attorney “reported the circumstance to the burgher officer and the Fiscal.”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile Hans fled.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 62 (quotations). A “carracarra” was a “sturdy bush rope” and was the most commonly used instrument for flogging enslaved people in Berbice. See Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (quotations).

<sup>43</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 62 (quotations).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. (quotations). According to John Wray, “the Negroes had frequently blamed Frederick as a poisoner” and complained about him to the previous owner of the estate. See Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>45</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 60 (quotations).

The following evening Hans returned to locate the “bad thing” hidden in Frederick’s house. He knew it was there “from the smell he had of it,” and with the help of “the girl who had lost her mother” or a twin, he was sure he could find “the pot of obiah.”<sup>46</sup> Two men brought Gabriel—a young female twin—to Frederick’s house, where she was blindfolded and given a pot to hold over a hole that Hans had ordered two other men to dig in the dirt floor. Hans “made the people examine the Pot to see if there was any thing in it, but Water,” and they all agreed that there was not.<sup>47</sup> But when Hans removed the cloth that covered the pot, it “appeared to contain a ram’s horn, some fluid, and the bones of some animal.”<sup>48</sup> The horn was cut open, which exposed “blood, Negro hair, shavings of nails, the head of a snake” and other objects commonly associated with obeah and Kongolese *minkisi*. “The stuff in the Horn,” Hans explained, “was the bad thing which had destroyed the Children but it would do so no longer.”<sup>49</sup>

Hans and the drivers might have been pleased that the Minje Mama dance had helped them identify the poison, but colonial authorities saw things differently. Hans was soon apprehended, and shortly thereafter the fiscal prosecuted him for practicing obeah. The fiscal recommended a death sentence, but the Court of Criminal Justice spared Hans’s life, perhaps because it agreed with Hans’s lawyer, who had argued that colonial authorities should take some responsibility for Hans’s belief in obeah because no efforts had been made in Berbice “to inform [Hans’s] Mind in Christianity” and he had “been permitted to remain in that pagan state in which he had been brought from his own Country.” The court sentenced Hans to be whipped under the gallows with his obeah paraphernalia around his neck, branded, imprisoned for a year, placed in the pillory four times, and forced to work in chains for the rest of his life. Those who had helped Hans were to be whipped, and at least one prisoner, Wray wrote, “was stripped naked when she was flogged.”<sup>50</sup> January was also demoted from his position as driver, a crushing blow to his status.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (“bad thing”); “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, pp. 60–63 (“the girl,” 62).

<sup>47</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

<sup>48</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 63.

<sup>49</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives. On *minkisi*, see Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C., 1981); Wyatt McGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, 1986).

<sup>50</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (quotations); “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, pp. 60–63, National Archives; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 199–200.

<sup>51</sup> As late as 1829, January remained angry with the manager, whom he blamed for losing his position as driver. See “Complaint of the slave January belonging to Plant. Deutchem,” Mar. 9, 1829, Fiscals’ Reports, CO 116/142, pp. 76–97.

As the people on Plantation Demtichem and nearby estates learned, the Minje Mama dance had exposed them to a host of dangers, including the colonial legal apparatus and significant physical violence. Nevertheless the Minje Mama dance remained a vital tool in the struggle to restore physical and spiritual health in a world where disease and death were daily realities and malevolent powers abounded.

When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter decided to allow Willem to perform the Minje Mama dance on their plantation two years later, they were taking a serious, if calculated, risk. One Sunday afternoon in early August 1821, Willem slipped into “a small *coriaal*” (dugout canoe) after finishing his day’s work at neighboring plantation Resolutie and paddled a short distance down the Berbice River to Op Hoop van Beter (see Figure I). When he arrived “he inquired for the [head] driver’s house,” one man explained, “where he remained till the evening.” Later that night, after visiting his wife, Willem “made the people dance the Makisi [Minje Mama] dance,” according to witnesses. “The man Cuffey [Willem] . . . was the Minje [Mama], and superintended the dance; if he was not there,” one witness explained, “it could not be done.”<sup>52</sup>

The dance evidently served its purpose: Willem returned to the plantation the next day and publicly denounced Madalon, an older African (probably Kongolese) woman, as “a bad woman, and the cause of the healthy people on the estate becoming sick.” Madalon appears to have been without family or many friends on the plantation, and this social isolation would have made her vulnerable to accusations of obeah. The person responsible had now been identified, but the healing process—and the real danger—had just begun. The challenge now, as Willem knew, was to “drive the bad story out of [Madalon’s] head.”<sup>53</sup>

The day after Willem denounced Madalon, he returned to Op Hoop van Beter to begin what would turn out to be a brutally violent and socially

<sup>52</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 14 (“small *coriaal*”), 21 (“he inquired”), 29 (“made the people”), 23 (“man Cuffey”).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 32 (“bad woman”), 25 (“drive the bad story”). Described by witnesses as “a Congo woman” and “rather advanced in years, but otherwise a healthy woman,” Madalon was about forty years old at the time of her death, according to an 1819 slave registration return that listed her age as thirty-seven. See *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 14 (“Congo woman”), 21 (“rather advanced”); “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24, National Archives. The average life span for enslaved people in Berbice in the 1820s was less than twenty-three years, and slaveholders frequently thought of slaves more than forty years old as “old.” See Higgman, *Slave Populations*, 18; Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 196. Though no one described Madalon as an obeah practitioner, enslaved women across the Caribbean practiced obeah. Enslaved men, however, accounted for the majority of obeah prosecutions. See Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 73–77; Handler, *New West Indian Guide* 74: 62 n. 14; Diana Paton, “Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica,” *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 923–54, esp. 932; Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority,” 194–95.

divisive healing process. After the people had finished their work in the fields “and retired to the negro-houses,” one witness explained, Willem called several people together, including Madalon and the drivers. That night, according to estate watchman Frederick, “the woman Madalon was flogged by the negroes before the driver Primo’s door, and at the same time pepper was rubbed into her private parts” to help purify her.<sup>54</sup>

Willem and the drivers tried to keep this gathering secret, but at some point the manager, J. Helmers, heard noises coming from the “negro-yard” and sent overseer Johannes Hendrick Lips to investigate. “The first person the overseer met was Willem,” one witness testified, “who took up some ashes from the fire and strewed them across the road, which prevented any body [from] seeing farther on.” Meanwhile Primo told the overseer that the commotion “was nothing but the people rejoicing in consequence of having finished weeding the last field of heavy grass.”<sup>55</sup>

The overseer gone, Willem and the others finished whipping Madalon and then left her tied up by the wrists. Badly beaten and probably terrified, she would have spent the night in this position had it not been for Frederick, who untied her, covered her with a blanket, and took her to his house to rest and recover and possibly to protect her from Willem. Willem soon found out what Frederick had done, however, and threatened to flog him for interfering.<sup>56</sup>

How much and what kinds of violence were the slaves on Op Hoop van Beter willing to accept? Did Willem’s recourse to physical force and intimidation bolster his authority or alienate others? Focusing on the specific forms of violence Willem employed and others’ reactions to them helps explain why enslaved people held ambivalent attitudes toward obeah practitioners. The centrality of violence in Willem’s practice of obeah also suggests that Europeans were not the only people who recognized the efficacy of violence and terror for maintaining control on the plantation.

The morning after Madalon’s first beating, she went to work as usual. But with injuries still fresh from the night before, Frederick explained, she “was unable to get through her row.” Quashee, “a temporary driver” who might have also had a romantic relationship with Madalon, completed her work for her.<sup>57</sup> “The driver asked her why she did not go to the hospital,” another witness recalled, “seeing she was full of itch on her backside and a

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 15 (quotations). Some enslaved people in the U.S. South similarly used “red pepper” to prevent witches from reentering the bodies of the people they possessed. See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978), 85.

<sup>55</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 34 (“negro-yard”), 25 (“first person”).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. It is unclear what relationship existed between Quashee and Madalon. Frederick stated only that Quashee “also had her.” Enslaved people in Berbice used the term row to refer to their daily task. See Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 147 n. 41.

boil on her thigh," not to mention "some blood on her clothes."<sup>58</sup> Despite her injuries Madalon claimed she "preferred going to her work to going to the hospital, as there she got nothing but barley to eat."<sup>59</sup> Madalon had no shortage of reasons for avoiding the hospital, where she would have likely been placed in the stocks and subjected to painful, if not fatal, medical procedures.

Madalon did not tell Helmers what Willem and the others had done to her. Perhaps she thought that her ordeal was over and that speaking up would only provoke Willem and make matters worse. Or maybe she was afraid that the manager might side with Willem and the drivers and punish her for using obeah against other slaves. To make sure that no one else went to the manager, Willem had "administered to the other negroes a drink," Frederick testified, "declaring that it would be the death of any one of them who should reveal what had taken place." Others probably kept quiet because they feared Willem's physical violence. When the fiscal asked Kees, the driver in charge of the *logie* (coffee storehouse), for example, why he did not go to the manager, he explained that "he was too much afraid of Willem, from the severe punishments he inflicted upon them." Lest the fiscal doubt him, Kees removed his clothes to reveal "the scars, or remains of flogging he had received from Willem."<sup>60</sup>

Others probably kept quiet because the beating that Madalon had endured was not unusual. After all, slaves lived in a world ruled by endemic violence, and this was not the first time they had seen ritual flogging used to heal or to deal with a suspected obeah practitioner. Indeed Willem himself had previously performed the Minje Mama dance and other healing rituals on the plantation, and some people thought the efficacy of these treatments justified the pain they inflicted.

According to Vigilant, the Minje Mama dance was frequently "performed at plantation Op Hoop van Beter, on Sundays." He "was present on one occasion when it was danced, and saw a negro . . . denounced as a confoe man, and severely beat; the negro Willem . . . appeared to be the principal, and promoter of the dancing." Other witnesses corroborated Vigilant's account and identified the man beaten as David, who had confessed to William Sterk that he had been "flogged by the orders of the negro Willem, called also Attetta Sara" because the Op Hoop van Beter people "blamed him as being one of the Obii people on the estate." And according to Sterk, "after [David] was flogged he was ordered to give payment to . . . Willem for having flogged the Obeah work out of his head."

<sup>58</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 17 ("driver asked"); Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives ("some blood").

<sup>59</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 ("administered"), 29 ("too much afraid"). For loyalty oath ceremonies in the Caribbean, see Kenneth Bilby, "Swearing by the Past, Swearing to the Future: Sacred Oaths, Alliances, and Treaties among the Guianese and Jamaican Maroons," *Ethnohistory* 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 655–89.

The fact that Willem expected compensation, like most healers, suggests that at least some of the people on the estate did not see this violence as torture or “punishment,” as the fiscal and other Europeans did, but rather as an effective, if dangerous, healing strategy. David also knew, however, that sometimes Willem’s violence had little to do with healing. When David offered Willem “three ells of Osnaburgh’s,” a coarse fabric, as payment, Willem became angry and “struck him with his own cutlass on the forehead, saying what he had sent him was not sufficient, and that Obeah people were not allowed to wear any thing of value.”<sup>61</sup>

Violence had also played a central role in Hans’s performance of the Minje Mama dance and his construction of authority. Hans beat everyone who participated in the dance; threatened to flog or kill Gabriel, the young girl who helped him find the poison in Frederick’s house, if she cried; and rubbed “guinea pepper” in the eyes of participants in the dance. Though painful, these actions were essential to the Minje Mama dance’s success: Venus was able to identify Frederick as the poisoner, and several witnesses testified that they were able to “recover.”<sup>62</sup>

If violence was part of Willem’s healing practice, it was also central to his efforts to maintain authority, stifle dissent, and coerce others into helping him. In addition to threatening to flog Frederick, Willem attacked one of the drivers for failing to take part in the Minje Mama dance. Willem “beat me the following morning for not being present at the dance,” the driver told the fiscal. When the same driver admitted that he helped beat Madalon the following night, he claimed that he did so only because of “the influence of dread and fear under which he . . . as well as the rest of the negroes were, of the power possessed by the negro Willem . . . who was esteemed a great Obeah man, and the Minje Mama.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed historians have long noted the fear that obeah practitioners inspired throughout the Caribbean, and Berbice was no exception. As Wray observed, “It is impossible to describe the influence these men [obeah practitioners] obtain over the minds of the negroes.”<sup>64</sup> Their influence derived from their ability to heal, of course, but also from their capacity for violence and intimidation.

On the third day, Willem returned to the plantation to finish what he had begun. He had Madalon tied up in front of the lead driver’s door that night, where she was flogged again, this time worse than before. Armed with branches from coconut and calabash trees, slaves took turns beat-

<sup>61</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 14 (“performed”), 21–22 (“flogged by the orders,” “three ells,” 22), 9 (“punishment”); “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24, National Archives.

<sup>62</sup> “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, pp. 60–63, National Archives.

<sup>63</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 29 (“beat me”), 43–44 (“influence of dread,” 44).

<sup>64</sup> John Wray, in Thomas Rain, *The Life and Labours of John Wray, Pioneer Missionary in British Guiana* (London, 1892), 114.

ing her, under Willem's command. Eventually, Madalon "acknowledged she had been guilty of the death of several persons."<sup>65</sup> But confessing did not bring an end to her ordeal. The physical abuse Willem and the others inflicted on Madalon, unlike the torture of suspected witches in early modern Europe or North America, was designed less to elicit a confession than to serve as a sort of exorcism. And an admission of guilt did not mean that the "bad thing" had been removed.

So Willem and the others continued to beat Madalon, so badly, in fact, that "she fainted from the excess of punishment," according to one witness. Willem "said it was only a sham" and ordered that the violence continue. His assistants dragged Madalon to a mango tree, where they "tied [her] up by the hands," one man explained, "so that her toes could just touch the ground." Frederick, who was hiding "in one of the negro-houses" to avoid Willem, told the fiscal that "the persons who surrounded and punished her were too numerous for him to distinguish the particular individuals who were striking her."<sup>66</sup>

Yet not everyone sanctioned this violence. Only about a dozen people—a small fraction of the estate's slave population—appear in the trial record as participants in Madalon's beating. Some people, such as Frederick, disapproved of what was happening; others were apparently not welcome. One man, for instance, testified that "the negroes would not trust him . . . to be present at any of these transactions, in consequence of being hospital-mate." Another man explained that "Willem called him to go help flog the woman, but he did not go." "He saw the woman flogged," he admitted, "but did not help."<sup>67</sup> When Hans went to Plantation Demtichem—an estate with more than three hundred slaves—the situation was much the same: only a small group took part in the Minje Mama dance.<sup>68</sup>

The types of physical violence that Hans and Willem used—whippings, floggings, beatings, and the application of peppers—were among the methods favored by slaveholders for torturing and punishing enslaved people. These forms of violence, moreover, were absent in West African and Central African rituals designed to identify or purify suspected witches or sorcerers, which suggests that the Minje Mama dance was a Caribbean phenomenon, not a watered-down African survival or retention. Its cosmological origins lay in various parts of Africa, but the brutal violence that characterized its practice had been learned on Caribbean slave plantations.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 ("she fainted"), 15 ("one of the negro-houses"), 37.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 ("negroes would not"), 27 ("Willem called him").

<sup>68</sup> A total of 308 slaves—140 Africans and 168 Creoles—lived on Plantation Demtichem in 1819. See Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture," 335.

<sup>69</sup> Though many African societies killed suspected witches or sorcerers—often by forcing them to consume poison—I have found no evidence that suspected witches were whipped. For antiwitchcraft or witch-cleansing practices in Africa, see Jan

Obeah practitioners thus derived their authority from both spiritual and physical powers. Men such as Hans and Willem appropriated slave masters' technology of control and terror to buttress their already impressive authority as spiritual experts and to stifle dissent among doubters. The Minje Mama dance therefore highlights the persistence of African practices and cosmologies in American slave societies and enslaved people's ability to adapt or modify such practices. We should not assume that the Minje Mama dance resonated with all slaves equally or that they supported its violent incarnation in Berbice merely because of its African roots.

Not long after Madalon confessed, one witness testified, Willem hit her with a shovel across the back, "which made her fall down, and exclaim she was dying." Madalon begged for her life. "You are killing me," she cried out. "No," Willem told her, "we are not killing you, but I will drive the bad story out of your head." Willem remained defiant and continued to flog her. He claimed that he could bring Madalon back to life if she died before the healing process was complete. At this point several men began to worry that the violence had spun out of control. As one man told lead driver Primo, "it was going too far." But those who tried to stop Willem failed. Frederick tried to intervene, but Willem drove him away and "said nothing could happen to the woman."<sup>70</sup> When Primo, the estate's highest-ranking slave and the one who had asked Willem to halt the epidemic in the first place, tried to end things himself, Willem struck him with a whip and continued to beat Madalon. Even the drivers had become powerless to stop him.<sup>71</sup>

Willem and the others left Madalon, unconscious, tied to a nearby sand-koker tree for the night.<sup>72</sup> Early the next morning, the people on Op Hoop van Beter discovered that she was dead.

---

Vansina, "The Bushong Poison Ordeal," in *Man in Africa*, ed. Mary Douglas and Phyllis M. Kaberry (London, 1969), 245–60; Alison Redmayne, "Chikanga: An African Diviner with an International Reputation," in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. Douglas (London, 1970), 103–28; R. G. Willis, "Instant Millennium: The Sociology of African Witch-Cleansing Cults," *ibid.*, 129–39. Stephan Palmié makes a similar argument regarding Afro-Cuban *regla ocha*, which he interprets as "an aggregate formation in which notions deriving from western Central African minkisi cults and Yoruba-derived forms of worship of divine beings known as *órísá* were jointly conjugated through a single New World history of enslavement, abuse, and depersonalization." See Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, N.C., 2002), 26.

<sup>70</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 26 ("which made her," "going too far"), 25 ("You are killing me").

<sup>71</sup> Multiple witnesses told the fiscal that Willem had flogged Primo and suggested that "if Primo would take off his jacket, the marks would be seen where Willem had struck him with a whip, for interfering when the punishment became too severe." The fiscal ordered Primo to take off his jacket, and "his shoulder exhibited the mark of a stroke of a whip." *Ibid.*, 35 (quotations), 21, 26.

<sup>72</sup> Sand-koker was the common name for trees of the genus *Erythrina*, which provided shade on some coffee plantations. See Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture," 178; Hanif Gulmahamad, *Stories and Poems by a Guyanese Village Boy* (n.p., 2009), 204.



Madalon's death resulted in "the utter astonishment of many of the negroes," who saw it as proof that the obeah practitioner who was supposed to "bring things on the estate to order" had failed them.<sup>73</sup> Any authority obeah practitioners such as Willem wielded rested not only on their capacity for violence and intimidation but also on demonstrable success in practicing their craft. Madalon's death produced for Willem a sudden and almost complete loss of authority and therefore created a major crisis for him, for the drivers who had called him in, and for the other slaves on Op Hoop van Beter.

Far from helping, Willem had created a new set of dangers for everyone on the plantation, himself included. If word got out about the obeah rituals that had taken place or about Madalon's death, anyone who had failed to alert authorities or helped Willem might face interrogation, torture, and severe punishment. The people on Op Hoop van Beter no doubt knew what had happened to Hans and the other people on Plantation Demtichem. The ways that the various actors—Willem, the drivers, those who had participated in the rituals, Madalon's husband, and other bystanders—responded to Madalon's death reveal how complete Willem's loss of authority was and, paradoxically, how desperate most people were to keep the entire matter secret for as long as possible.

The immediate problem was getting rid of the corpse. Manager Helmers would soon notice Madalon's absence, and if he found the body, the numerous cuts, bruises, and welts it bore—the "marks of the punishment were very visible," one man observed—would prompt a threatening investigation. But even this urgent and seemingly simple task proved difficult for Willem. When he ordered a group of men to bury the body, they refused. They might have viewed the corpse as contaminated or spiritually dangerous, or maybe they were simply reluctant to get more involved in what was shaping up to be a major disaster. Willem "grew angry, and drove them away," one man recalled. "Willem said it was of no consequence whether they had buried the body or not, as he would do that," another witness testified. He boasted that "he was Minje Mama; he had plenty of people to assist him," but he soon realized that in fact no one was willing to help.<sup>74</sup>

Willem's encounter with Madalon's husband, Munro, who came looking for his wife a few days after she went missing, supplied a poignant illustration of just how little authority Willem had left. When Munro went to Op Hoop van Beter, Willem confronted him, asking, "How did you dare to go first to the manager's house?" Munro told him that he went to show his pass and, challenging Willem's claim to authority, insulted him: "I asked the Atetta Sara [Willem] if he thought I ought to have brought my pass first to him, or if he could read it?" Provoked to violence yet again, Willem ordered "several of the men . . . to beat [Munro]," but the others

<sup>73</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 40 ("utter astonishment"), 22 ("bring things").

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 ("marks"), 29 ("grew angry"), 25 ("Willem said").

“interfered in his behalf.” Fortuyn “said he had brought the Attetta Sara on the estate, and that he could not beat him, Munro, for nothing.”<sup>75</sup>

As frustrating as it must have been to lose the support of the people on Op Hoop van Beter, things could have been even worse for Willem. Take, for instance, the case of Mamadoe, an obeah practitioner or “doctor” who in 1824 wound up in trouble when he failed to find a permanent cure for a woman’s ailment on Plantation Nigg. When the woman’s husband became frustrated by Mamadoe’s lack of attention to his wife, his “country man” Rhina (both were Kongolese) threatened Mamadoe: “I will give you this moon to cure her & if you do not do so in that time, I will know what to do to you.” Rhina explained that “in his country, the way they treat Obiah men is to kill them, put them in their House & set fire to it.”<sup>76</sup> A few days later, Mamadoe’s badly beaten body was found in his hut, which had been burned to the ground.<sup>77</sup>

When Willem’s authority collapsed, the drivers sought to take charge. But they, like Willem, found their authority tested when a group of men refused their order to dispose of Madalon’s body. Baron explained that they had “told the driver *in Creole*, You have sent us five negroes to bury the body, and if afterwards it comes to the knowledge of the white people you will put us forward to bear the blame, and you will remain behind, concealed.” The following afternoon, the “driver said to [Baron], Yesterday you refused to bury that body, to-day we have done it ourselves.” He explained “that they had buried the body without his assistance, and put the estate in order, or to rights again.” They “had sunk the body in a small coriall with weights” in some nearby body of water.<sup>78</sup> Taking responsibility for the conspiracy, the drivers thus persuaded others that they were not going to simply blame them for Madalon’s death, as Baron feared.

Madalon’s death and the crisis it provoked united the slave community on Op Hoop van Beter, at least temporarily, around the shared goal of avoiding punishment for her murder and the practice of obeah. For several weeks none of the dozens, if not hundreds, of people who knew about Madalon’s death told colonial authorities what they had seen or heard. Part of the reason they kept quiet was that Willem and the drivers had threatened to kill them if they revealed what they knew. In addition to the loyalty oath some had taken earlier, the drivers told everyone “that if they revealed it to the Fiscal, or other white person, they should be hung.” Such threats, they claimed, “prevented them at first from telling the truth.”<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 (quotations).

<sup>76</sup> “Investigation into the probable circumstances of the death of the negro Mamadoe . . .,” Nov. 8, 1824, CO 116/140, National Archives.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 19 (“told the driver”), 20 (“they had buried”).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Helmets, the manager on Op Hoop van Beter, however, might have known what had happened to Madalon long before Vigilant came forward in September and identified Willem as “the promoter of the said Minje Mama dance” and Madalon’s murderer. When Sterk told Helmets what he had learned, the manager admitted: “Something I have heard; but upon negro testimony I can make no dependence, as I have often experienced, without certain proof attached to the same.” More revealing still, one of the drivers claimed that “the manager himself knew” that the drivers had gone to Willem. The manager “said he must find some person capable of finding out who it was that was the cause of the death of so many Creoles [children] on the estate,” the driver testified.<sup>80</sup> If this was true, the manager had good reason to feign ignorance. His tolerance of obeah rituals and his inability to prevent the murder of one of his slaves would have been damning evidence of his failure to maintain adequate discipline and control on the plantation.

For months after Willem’s arrest, the fiscal interrogated anyone he thought might have witnessed or participated in the Minje Mama dance. At one point he questioned more than half a dozen enslaved people on the plantation itself but, unfortunately for him, they had apparently “preconcerted and agreed upon a certain statement, declaring their total ignorance of the subjects of inquiry.” Eventually, however, several witnesses admitted that Madalon had died as a result of the Minje Mama dance and that Willem was, as one man put it, “the cause of all the bad business.”<sup>81</sup>

Many witnesses admitted that they had participated in the Minje Mama dance but claimed that Willem and the drivers had forced them to. Willem and the drivers, however, steadfastly denied any knowledge of Madalon’s death or the Minje Mama dance. Willem told the fiscal that the only reason he went to Op Hoop van Beter was “to see [his] wife Johanna” and that he had never organized the dance or practiced obeah.<sup>82</sup>

Willem could have pursued the strategy that Hans employed two years earlier: admit to being an obeah practitioner or healer and try to justify the rituals he organized. Hans told John Wray, who was able to speak with him because he understood Berbice Dutch, that he saw himself as a healer who provided valuable services. He had, for example, administered ritual washings to pregnant women and children on multiple plantations (including Buses Lust, where Willem lived) to prevent the women from miscarrying and the children from dying. “A Congo,” Hans learned to heal in his “own country,” where his abilities set him apart. “Every one there is not gifted with this power, but only a few which comes from God,” he explained. According to Wray, Hans had been “instructed in the Roman Catholic Religion” in

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 (“promoter”), 13 (“Something I have heard”), 19 (“manager himself knew”). Adolff, an enslaved man on Op Hoop van Beter, also claimed that “we were informed by the drivers that the manager knew of it.” *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18 (“preconcerted,” 18), 20 (“cause”), 6.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Central Africa. Among Hans's powers was the ability to locate poison: "If I go to any house where poison is hid I can discover it from the smell."<sup>83</sup>

Hans insisted that he never used his powers for antisocial purposes. "Numerous applications have been made to me [to harm Europeans] but I have always rejected them. These applications," Hans claimed, "have been made to me by Negroes who have bad masters to cool their hearts—that is no part of my knowledge." Aware of the stigma attached to the term obeah, Hans told Wray that he was "no Obiah man and [did] nothing that is bad." "All my Art," he explained, "consists in helping negroes that are sick."<sup>84</sup>

Willem, unlike Hans, denied being any sort of healer or spiritual authority. His only strategy of defense was to emphasize the fact that no one had found Madalon's body. Willem "denie[d] the whole of the circumstance; and in order to prove the whole is lie, he wishe[d] that the people should be taken to the estate, and made to point out where the body is buried."<sup>85</sup> Willem knew, of course, that Madalon's remains would have been all but impossible to find.

AFTER HEARING TESTIMONY from more than a dozen witnesses, the fiscal aggressively prosecuted Willem and the people who assisted him, particularly the drivers. He was primarily concerned with the drivers' submission to an obeah practitioner—an illegitimate and dangerous authority in the fiscal's eyes. "Such conduct on the part of drivers having the charge of slaves," the fiscal explained, "cannot be tolerated, but on the contrary ought to be severely punished."<sup>86</sup>

The fiscal argued that Kees, the *logie* driver, should be taken to the plantation to "stand with a rope round his neck fastened to the mangoe-tree

<sup>83</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives. Hans was probably a Kongolese *nganga ngombo*, a diviner or spirit medium who helped others locate lost items or identify the cause of death or sickness. See Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 243; John K. Thornton, "Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500–1700," in Heywood, *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations*, 71–90, esp. 81.

<sup>84</sup> Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives. Among some Africans and Caribbean slaves, coolness in this context would have been associated with the restoration of social stability or tranquility. See Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool," *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1973): 41–43, 64–67, 89–91; Gill, "Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture," 343–44. See also Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 107–12. Though Hans distinguished his healing activities from obeah, colonial authorities did not: the Court of Criminal Justice believed he was "in the habit of carrying on a regular obeah trade." In Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 198.

<sup>85</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 34.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. The fiscal also prosecuted Corydon and Allegro, two enslaved men who had helped beat Madalon, because they had "los[t] sight of the duty and obedience due to their proprietors, and submitt[ed] themselves to the authority of the negro Willem." Allegro was "ill, and unable to attend and take his trial at the present session," but the court sentenced Corydon "to receive *One Hundred Lashes*." *Ibid.*, 44 ("los[t] sight"), 10 ("ill"), 11 ("to receive").

under which the woman Madalon was suspended,” and then be flogged “at the discretion of the honourable Court, and afterwards worked in chains . . . for the period of seven years.” Kees begged for mercy on the grounds that he was “but a boy, and [had] only lately” been appointed as a driver. Young and inexperienced, he “had not the authority” to stand up to Willem. He also claimed that because he did not “go to the field with the people” he had “no authority over them.” Moreover, Kees added, “if not ordered by Willem, who also flogged me, I should not have beat the woman.”<sup>87</sup> Unconvinced, the court sentenced Kees to one hundred lashes under the mango tree.<sup>88</sup>

Primo and Mey deserved more severe punishments, the fiscal argued, because they were the lead drivers, the men responsible for day-to-day discipline and order. The fiscal chastised them for “subjecting themselves (the drivers), in the presence of the gang of negroes over which they were placed, to the implicit obedience of the orders and commands of . . . Willem.” They had failed to maintain “the authority confided to them, by enforcing due subordination on the estate” and had allowed the Minje Mama dance to be performed despite its prohibition. The real crime, the fiscal implied, was not Madalon’s murder but their failure to challenge Willem and faithfully represent the plantation owner’s interests. The court agreed that the drivers’ actions were tantamount to treason and gave both a brutal sentence: three hundred lashes each. They were also to be “brand-marked, and degraded as drivers, afterwards to be worked in chains” for a year.<sup>89</sup>

Willem stood accused of murdering Madalon. But Madalon’s death was only the symptom of a larger problem: Willem’s ability to convince a wide range of people to obey him. The fiscal accused him “of treasonable practices, by deluding the minds of the negroes belonging to plantation Op Hoop van Beter . . . from their obedience to the laws of the land, and their proprietors, by instituting and causing to be danced . . . the Minje Mama dance.” Equally reprehensible was the fact that Willem “proceeded to inflict corporal punishment on several of the negroes, and even on the drivers of said estate, thereby confirming in the minds of the gang his . . . extent of power.” He had, in effect, acted more like a master than a slave. Willem had “used every means to influence the minds of the gang on plantation Op Hoop van Beter, in the belief of his possessing supernatural power” and had “taken it upon himself to rectify abuses, presuming to judge and prescribe punishments.” Because “the power of taking away life is confided solely to regular constituted authorities; and . . . all attempts to

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 44 (“stand with a rope”), 32 (“but a boy”), 33 (“go to the field”).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Kees was the plantation’s “Overseer on the Logie” as early as 1819, when he was twenty-six years old, according to “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24, National Archives.

<sup>89</sup> *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 41 (“subjecting themselves”), 42 (“authority confided”), 10 (“brand-marked”).

assert such power by any individual can only tend to the subversion of all rule and subordination,” the fiscal reasoned, Willem’s crimes needed to be punished with the utmost severity.<sup>90</sup> Europeans and enslaved Africans and Afro-Creoles had different attitudes toward obeah, but they all recognized its political power and the dangers it posed—both to the bodies and lives of enslaved people and to the plantation system itself.

On January 14, 1822—more than five months after Madalon had been killed—a unanimous court found Willem guilty of murder and of “dancing, or causing to be danced . . . the Minje or Water Mama dance.” It issued a sentence severe enough, it hoped, that in future people would think twice about becoming involved with obeah. Willem was to be removed from the jail where he had been confined for the previous four months and taken to Op Hoop van Beter. There he would be “delivered into the hands of the public executioner, and in the presence of this Court . . . be hung by the neck on the Mangoe tree under which the negress Madelon was suspended during her aforesaid punishment, until . . . dead.” Afterward Willem was to have “his head . . . severed from his body, and stuck on a pole . . . there to remain until destroyed by the elements, or birds of prey.”<sup>91</sup> This gruesome execution and mutilation were designed to do more than punish Willem. As Vincent Brown and Diana Paton have shown, planters hoped this “spiritual terror” and “symbolics of mutilation” would send a clear message to other slaves: this is what happens when you break our laws.<sup>92</sup> Willem’s decapitated body would be buried under the same mango tree, a symbolic effort to reclaim the space for the plantation regime and an attempt to imprint a haunted memory of violence and terror on the landscape.<sup>93</sup>

Four days after Willem’s conviction, the fiscal and other officials accompanied Willem and the other prisoners to the plantation. According to John Wray, “the scene on the Estate was most solemn. The Governor, the Fiscal, and all the Members of the Court were present—also the Militia, and 400 or 500 Negroes and a great number of White people.” After Willem listened to his sentence, Wray recalled, he “walked firmly to the Tree, and told the Executioner to fasten the rope well.” Willem “walked up the Ladder” and Wray “offered up an earnest prayer.” A moment later “he was launched into an awful Eternity.”<sup>94</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 39–41 (“treasonable practices,” 39, “taken it upon himself,” 41).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 8 (“dancing”), 9 (“delivered into the hands”).

<sup>92</sup> Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority,” 186–88; Paton, *Journal of Social History* 34: 940 (“symbolics of mutilation”).

<sup>93</sup> Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 130–42.

<sup>94</sup> Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (quotations); *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 12.