OBEAH: BLACK AND WHITE MAGIC IN THE BAHAMAS

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of in-depth contact with Bahamian citizens in 1975 and 1976 while doing research on the folklore and folkmusic of the island group, I became more and more aware of the pervasiveness of *Obeah*. Previously, I had tended to dismiss the topic as superstition or a series of folktales carried over from previous generations. Beginning in 1976, however, I turned my attention to Obeah to determine as precisely as possible just what it means in the Bahamas and what the implications of the practice might be in the society. Initial findings were set forth in a modest monograph (Hedrick and Stephens: 1977). At that time we attempted to set forth a definition of Obeah; to address the rudiments of the practice and to set down a few preliminary conclusions. We called for more extended and intensive field work in the Bahamas, working directly with Obeahmen and women and indicated that one of our informants had offered to teach the senior author how and why various Obeah practices and functions are carried out.

On April 30, 1979, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, through Grant 3332, provided partial funding for the additional field work. The month of July, 1979 saw Hedrick in the Bahamas continuing the work begun 3 years earlier.

What ensued and the conclusions drawn constitute an important part of this report. In tying together the threads of the fabric for this publication, I have drawn liberally on the preliminary report alluded to earlier and I wish to reiterate my esteem for the abilities of my former research assistant and colleague, Jeanette E. Stephens and here to acknowledge her major contribution to the overall study.

I wish, once again, to extend my deepest thanks to Dr. Timothy McCartney, Clinical Psychologist in Nassau, for his continued good humor and invaluable aid in pursuing these studies. My appreciation, also goes to Dr. Carroll L. Riley for his suggestions on the manuscript and for his critical appraisal of the work.

Without the Wenner-Gren Foundation grant-in-aid, this work literally could not have been done: I am grateful.

Background

In addressing Obeah, one addresses the supernatural, the occult and the world of spirits; but one also is confronted with practical, everyday "bush medicine", an abundance of psychological manipulation, and some very flamboyant characters. Obeah is white magic and black magic; it is sorcery; it is positive and it is negative; it can cure or it can cause harm. Bahamian Obeah, in its pristine form, is not "voodoo", nor is it quite like any other similar practice in the adjacent Caribbean region. It is most commonly confused with Voodoo, as practiced in Haiti, or with similar practices in Jamaica, Guyana, Guadaloupe, Barbados and Grenada. However, Obeah—as practiced in the Bahamas—is unique and may be contrasted as well as compared with any other similar practice in this hemisphere. Obeah is not a religion and there are no "priests" or "priestesses"; there is no group practice (in fact, it is extremely rare to find Obeah practices utilized other than on a one-to-one basis), and there is no way to tell an Obeahman or woman met casually on the street. It is clandestine, but all-pervasive. As one informant has stated: "Obeah, it's a natural fact." Dr. Timothy McCartney (McCartney 1976:3-4), a clinical psychologist in Nassau, underscores the prevalence of the practice:

. . . I have been in contact with individuals who have been "fixed" (or hexed) and as a result are suffering from physical and mental pain. My interest in Obeah has led me to many an Obeah Man and Woman—going either as a patient or as a friend, interviewing and observing. I thought at first that I was seeing more people with "obeah problems", either because of my particular interest or because the word had gotten around that I was interested in this phenomenon. I even got to the stage that every patient that I saw was asked the standard questions as well as 'Have you ever been fixed,' or 'Do you think that you are fixed (or that someone has obeahed) you?' Imagine my amazement when nearly half of my patients answered in the affirmative to at least one of the above questions!!!

Comparison and Contrast

Traditional Bahamian Obeah and related practices can be considered distinctive and slightly conservative in relation to those of some other Caribbean areas (e.g., Haiti and Jamaica), since in the Bahamas there do not appear to be as many formal beliefs related to Obeah as in some other areas. In the Bahamas, for example, traditional Obeah is countered by the administration of additional Obeah (often employing bush medicine), while in Jamaica and elsewhere there is a formalized practice called Myalism (Williams, 1970:144) for that purpose. Myalism is the antithesis of negative Obeah, and it employs white magic and other rituals to counter Obeah's effects. Bahamians do not hold much belief in vampires as is the case elsewhere in the Caribbean. Also, they do not use several terms that are common elsewhere, such as "loogaroos" (vampires) (Bell, 1970:166), "Jumbies" or "Duppies" (ghosts) (Bell, 1948:17), and "Wanga" (a synonym for Obeah in some areas) (Williams, 1970:118). Lastly, traditional Obeah is not related to Voodoo, which is practiced primarily in Haiti. Voodoo is a religious cult comprised of elements of African religions and Catholicism. It involves group participation in ritual dancing, trance inducement and animal sacrifice for ceremonial purposes (Metraux, 1959:15). Thus, Voodoo varies considerably from the individual client-practitioner relationship directed at effecting some specific result through use of sorcery, which characterizes Obeah. With the influx of Haitian practitioners, however, the term "Voodoo" is being used more and more, even when referring to palmists, fortune tellers, etc.

Defining Obeah

It is necessary to set the parameters of discussion for this paper. Although a substantial amount of doubt will be cast on the abilities of contemporary practitioners at a later point, it is well to understand just what the researcher is up against when he begins his exploration of this topic.

Obeah has been defined by several persons who observed its practice in the Bahamas or in other Caribbean societies. Patterson (1975:188) gives a good, concise definition of it:

> Obeah was essentially a type of sorcery which largely involved harming others at the request of clients, by the use of charms, poisons, and shadow catching. It was an individual practice, performed by a professional who was paid by his individual clients.

Speaking in reference to the Bahamas, McCartney (1976:56) states:

> Obeah is the phenomenon of the supernatural. It renders evil or good; makes dreams come true; influences individuals either for their demise or holding them in one's power. It can cause one to become rich or it can make one poor. It can cause an illness, either physical or mental or can cure any physical or mental problems. It can cause death! It is a type of spiritualism, surrounded by many tales of unexplained phenomena, and surrounded with superstitions that evolve into a plethora of articles (fetishes), bush medicine, signs and specific directions as to what one may do.

An earlier description is provided in the testimony of a Jamaican Government employee at an inquiry concerning civil disturbances in Jamaica (Williams, 1970:194):

> It is a two-fold art; it is the art of poisoning, combined with the art of imposing upon the credulity of ignorant people, by a pretence of witchcraft. Its effects are produced by poisoning . . . the general belief is that Obeah men are acquainted with the venomous plants of this country; their habit of practice in it is by imposing on the Negroes by means of charms and things of that kind. . . .(Report of the Jamaica royal commision, 1866:521).

Despite the allusions to poisoning—which undoubtedly did occur in an earlier age—there is absolutely no evidence to be found that poisons are employed in current Obeah practices in the Bahamas. It is conceivable that the toxicity level of some ingredients of "bush medicine" might cause adverse effects, or even death, for a patient, but that would be truly coincidental. The topic of bush medicine will be taken up at the appropriate time; suffice it here to say that bush medicine and Obeah are two distinctly separate subjects.

In the practice of Obeah, individuals wishing to cause something to happen to someone, that is, to have a "fix" set on another person, seek out the services of an Obeah practitioner. The practitioner listens to the client's description of the situation, then in exchange for a monetary payment he/she recommends what should be done to remedy it. Generally, he/she gives the client, or has the client procure, certain substances—herbs, special liquids, animal products, items from the victim's person (e.g., hair, fingernail clippings, an article of clothing, etc.). The practitioner gives the client instructions as to what to do with the materials—place them in the victim's house, bury them in the victim's yard, hang them in a tree, etc. If the client follows the instructions, the desired results supposedly will be achieved.

Obeah is practiced in numerous situations, for a variety of reasons. In the Bahamas, the practice tends to incorporate at least superficial aspects of both black magic (negative or evil intentions) and white magic (positive or good intentions). It is often employed to effect revenge upon someone for situations that may revolve around problems of jealousy between romantic rivals, marriage disputes, or the identification and/or punishing of thieves. In its more positive aspects, Obeah is used for curing ailments, which themselves are sometimes believed to be the result of Obeah, or in bringing good fortune to the individual in some endeavor.

Subsequent to three years of reading every scrap of information on the topic which can be located and after exhaustive (and exhausting!) hours of interviewing both clients and purported practitioners of Obeah, I am convinced of one major fact: The effectiveness of Obeah is dependent upon the belief in the validity and power of the practice.

The practice, among other things, generally involves the placing of special herbs, other substances or objects in specified locations in order to affect the behavior of someone. Usually, the desired end is for something negative to happen to a person, often in revenge for his/her prior actions. Obeah may also be employed to effect some positive result. The men or women who practice Obeah assure their "clients" that the desired results will be achieved by following their instructions. Their clients as well as the "victims," generally have deep faith in the abilities of the Obeah practitioners, and thus they usually do consider the Obeah magic to work.

Among portions of the Bahamian society, Obeah is still considered a very effective force for bringing about results, as its validity is trusted as a "natural fact" of daily life. For these groups of individuals Obeah serves as a means of gaining control of situations that are otherwise uncontrollable. Obeah brings to bear aspects of the supernatural on everyday problems, thus aiding in their resolution, or at least resulting in the afflicted client being able to cope with those problems.

The following section of this work deals with Obeah as I believe the majority of Bahamians view it. Not being a Bahamian, perhaps I will have erred in some of my interpretations of the Bahamian thought processes as regards Obeah. However, until called to task on the matter, I am comfortable with my facts and my deductions.

Obeah and Bush Medicine

In the Bahamas, Obeah remains closely associated with the use of medicinal folk remedies known as "bush medicine" (Higgs, 1974:1). Bush medicine, or "medicine from the earth" (McCartney, 1976:97), involves the administering of pharmaceutical plants to heal ailments. In its

practice, indigenous Bahamian plants are collected and processed into substances used to prevent, relieve or cure diseases (e.g., heart conditions, kidney disease, chicken pox, diabetes and tuberculosis) and various other disorders (e.g., headaches, muscular aches, boils, coldsores and fevers) (Higgs, 1974:5-20). The leaves, bark or other parts of plants may be employed in bush medicine practices. Often the plants are boiled into teas and taken internally. Also, they may be made into salves and applied directly to an ailing area or may be washed over the patient's body. The latter practice is called a "bush bath" and is rather common in the Bahamas. The plants often have genuine curing value, although perhaps not always to the degree credited to them. The unjudicious use of some of them may also have distinctly harmful effects. Their effective ability is of the same sort that has been demonstrated for pharmaceutical herbs throughout the world for centuries.

The past decade has seen a great proliferation of crosscultural studies of "traditional" medical systems (Fabrega, 1975). The increasing delivery and implementation of 'Western' health care in various geographic regions have been greatly facilitated by the rapidly accumulating body of anthropological information on health-related behaviors in different societies. In a recent study of traditional medicine on Bimini, Halberstein and Saunders (1978:177) have noted that "Recent transcultural investigations have demonstrated that medical beliefs, practices, equipment, and healing substances are extremely heterogeneous in form and usage across different populations . . ." and that "The ultilization of medicinal plants has received special attention in [their] research because it is an important biosocial phenomenon influencing patterns of health and disease. These authors point out that "the present findings suggest that the Bimini medical system has historically been efficacious in the treatment and management of many health problems on the island" (Halberstein and Saunders 2978:177). Given the fact that the herbs and grasses utilized on Bimini are identical to those used on other Bahamian islands, we may empirically conclude that bush medicine has been efficacious throughout the nation. Certainly, no Bahamian whom I know—including medical doctors—totally discredits bush medicine as a valid practice.

The practice of bush medicine requires an intimate knowledge of local plants, methods of their preparation and effects of their administration. Traditional Obeah practitioners tend to be among such knowledgeable people. The practitioners use the plants, which—as mentioned before—often do have actual curing abilities, to aid in achieving desired Obeah results.

> The Obeah person believes that plants absorb the cosmic properties of the sun, moon and planets and whether they are taken internally, used as a poultice or worn as a fetish or amulet, they convey to you the desired results. The occult magic of bush medicine is almost unlimited and is supposed to give the individual excellent physical, mental and emotional health which can be acquired in no other way (McCartney, 1976:98).

The use of bush medicine in Obeah thus helps to lend credence to the Obeah practitioner's claims of power through the achievement of verifiable results from the plants. Bush medicine is not synonymous with Obeah, however. While Obeah practitioners may use bush medicine—since it brings direct results (and thus credibility) to their art—the practitioners of bush medicine are not necessarily Obeahmen and may not use Obeah as a part of their work at all. McCartney (1976:186) summarizes well the nature and value of the bush medicine practitioners:

> There are many people who practice bush medicine and healing, and even though people look at them as obeah practitioners, they are not. These people have a genuine pride in their knowledge. They also have an extraordinary facility of dealing with human problems—physically, and emotionally.
>
> These native healers perform as valid a service as the trained professional. In effect, many of these "healers" are more effective than professionals, because not only do they share their clients' culture, communicate in language that they understand, but they live up to their clients' expectations.

The end result of Halberstein and Saunders' in-depth study is that

"The evidence suggests that the activities of native healing specialists and the use of medicinal plants have probably been highly adaptive in health maintenance and disease management in the population. Many of the plants possess chemical substances which may be effective against a number of conditions historically found in the population, including hypertension, gastrointestinal problems, diabetes, kidney and urinary disorders, pain such as in arthritis and rheumatism, and others." (Halberstein and Saunders, 1978:197).

There really can be no serious doubt but what bush medicine is a valid pharmaceutical practice in the curing of certain diseases. However, as frequently happens, quackery creeps into bush medicine also. In 1979, I heard of a tonic being sold for the purpose of increasing male virility. Through my informants, I found that a very bright young man who is a tour guide prepared this concoction and quite regularly made as much or more than his regular salary by selling bottles of the potion to his patrons as well as to some Bahamian customers. While there is no law against selling such materials, the fellow was a bit reticent to meet with me initially since he thought that, somehow, I represented the "government" or was a medical doctor out to do him in. Once he was assured to the contrary by mutual acquaintances, he quite openly came forward with samples of his brew and very freely discussed the contents and method of preparation and dosage. Although I purchased a two-quart Wesson Oil bottle full of the vile-smelling and suspicious-looking liquor for "only" $10, he assured me that he regularly gets from $15 to $25 from the male tourist for the same amount. I was given the "Bahamian price."

Although the majority of bush medicine prepared for internal consumption is prepared by boiling the various constituents, this young man simply steeped his contents in water for a period of approximately one week. He listed the contents, aside from fresh water, as being: Five Fingers; Strong Back; Love Vine or Dodder; Soldier Vine or Soldier Wine (also know as Stiff Prick or Stiff Cock), and Madeira Bark. Subsequent analysis of the plants and bark by a professional botanist corroborated the identifications which are listed with their taxonomy:

Five Finger(s), Feather Bed (*Tabebuia Bahamensis)*
Strong Back (*Bourreria Ovata)*
Love Vine, Dodder *(Cassytha filiformis (Cassythaceae)*
Soldier Vine, Soldier Wine, Stiff Prick, Stiff Cock ***(Tournefortia Volumbilis)***
Madeira Bark *(Mahogany bark)*

It will be noted that the above constituents contain gentisic acid (a phenolic acid), some alkaloids, sugar alcohol, methyl ether, etc. I am assured that a calming effect and a feeling of well-being can creep over a person having consumed several ounces of the liquor. The "prescription" which was given me was to use it as either an appetite arouser or as a sexual potency aid, i.e., an aphrodisiac. The dosage is as follows: First day, drink one glass of liquid prepared by mixing ¾ glass of the potion (known as "Sexy Batch" or "Roots") with ¼ glass of sweet milk and brandy; for the ensuing six days, one takes ½ glass of the brew, prepared with ¼ glass of liquor plus ¼ glass of sweet milk and brandy. Although a bit hazy as to exactly how much brandy should be included, he eventually felt that "to taste" would be appropriate, cautioning that "too much" might undo the good things promised by the therapeutic dosage.

McCartney (1976:99) lists a very similar recipe designed for the same purpose:

One of the most famous Bahamian concoctions that males rely on, is the following bush tonic for fertility.

(1) Gather the following from the bush:
- (a) Love Vine
- (b) Stiff Cock
- (c) Five Fingers
- (d) Gamalame

(e) Pine Bark
(f) Sweet Margaret

(2) If any one of these bushes cannot be readily obtained, one can substitute either "old man" or "old woman."
(3) Boil in a minimum amount of water these bushes and strain.
(4) Add a little sugar, boil again for five minutes.
(5) Add rum or brandy, boil for two minutes.
(6) Carnation cream (a little bit) can be added, but this is optional.
(7) Pour in a bottle (preferably a dark colored bottle) and allow to "steep" for about three weeks before drinking.

I cannot personally give witness to the efficacy of this medicine, nor have I found anyone who will admit to having drunk it—including the young man who made the batch I purchased. He did, however, say that while he could not guarantee results, some of his clients had assured him that it had worked wonders for them within hours. . . . The best rule of thumb for anyone wanting to sample any bush medicine of any type is to try to find a legitimate bush medicine practitioner through other Bahamians and, then, *caveat emptor.* Certainly, with amateurs abroad concocting brews from potentially dangerous herbs and materials, it is nothing to take lightly.

THE PRACTICE OF OBEAH
as Perceived by Bahamians

I should like to point out at the beginning of this section that what follows is primarily a description of the beliefs of *traditional* Obeah, as viewed by Bahamians. As will be noted further on, the current status of Obeah in the Bahamas is, simply, that it is rapidly disappearing if it has not, indeed, already disappeared. Interestingly, though, those who will discuss the matter still view Obeah in its historic context, i.e., what it was, not what it is. The following is my interpretation of how native Bahamians see the matter.

The practice of Obeah may be found at many locations in the Bahamas. It is most pervasive on Cat and Andros Islands, where it allegedly occurs in its most "pure" form. These islands have not been subject to as many recent socio-cultural changes from outside influences as some areas of the Bahamas. Thus, they are held by most Bahamians to be enclaves where the earlier, more "traditional" forms of Obeah have been retained. Obeah is supposed to be particularly prevalent on Cat Island, where apparently a large percentage of the population has a deep and serious belief in it. It is stated, for example (Forbes, 1940:191), that:

> The people of Cat Island do not like marrying outside their own settlements. They prefer to know all about the family, its blessings and its curses, from which they choose a bride or groom. Who knows what strangers might be able to do in the way of Obeah, about which everyone talks. . . .

Obeah is also reported on Acklins, Mayaguana, South Eleuthera, Crooked Island and the Exuma Cays (McCartney, 1976:78). It is practiced on New Providence (centering in the Nassauvian suburban area of Fox Hill) where it has come to employ more sophisticated paraphernalia, such as commercially produced ointments and cures, partially as a result of increased external influences on that island.

Obeah is practiced by essentially "ordinary" persons who happen to have the ability to effectively utilize its powers. Practitioners may be either men or women, Outwardly, they usually conduct unobtrusive lives and professions as average members of the society. As a rule, they do not wear any distinctive clothing or other personal items that denote their trade. There are no recognized costumes or insignia distinctive to them. An informant reports, however, that he does know of one Obeahwoman who wears a silver bracelet with supposedly secret magic inscriptions on it as part of her trade, although this does not automatically distinguish her as a practitioner. Obeah prac-

titioners are not manifestly wealthy as a group, although they do at times receive sizable payments for their services (which can amount to hundreds of dollars in difficult cases). The unobtrusive posture of the practitioners reflects the nature of the art: (1) because Obeah has been illegal, its practitioners historically have had to keep their identities a secret for fear of reprisals; and (2) the air of secrecy aids in maintaining the mystery associated with the practice, thereby enhancing the suggestion of its having special powers. An individual's success as a practitioner depends, to a large degree, on his reputation of having strong magical powers and the ability to achieve effective results. The more powerful the person is, the more he is feared and his abilities respected.

Obeah may be learned from several different sources. Some practitioners are said to be "born with the gift", which is discovered during their childhood and is encouraged to develop into a profession. Such individuals, or others who are interested but not inherently "gifted", learn the specifics of the art from older, established practitioners to whom they are "apprenticed." Usually the teacher is a parent, grandparent or other relative, but it may be any person knowledgeable in Obeah. Practitioners may be reluctant to teach their knowledge to others unless they are assured of the latter's sincerity, for fear of divulging "trade secrets" which would diminish the aura of mystery, the prestige and the mystique of the practice. Other persons "received their 'power' during adulthood with a 'vision' or, while 'in a trance,' were instructed into their art" (McCartney, 1976:79). The same author (1976:78) reports that: "Most of the older Bahamian practitioners are Bahamian born, but there is an increasing number of Haitian-Bahamians, Jamaicans and a few other nationalities who have quite a lucrative practice." Some novice practitioners are reported to have gone to Haiti or Jamaica to learn the art because it is so well-developed there.

Obeah practices are generally initiated by a secret meeting between a prospective client and a practitioner. This usually takes place in the home of the latter. The residences of several practitioners have been described as being well-stocked with the items of their trade. An account of a nineteenth century Obeah-man's house on Grenada (Bell, 1970:15,16) is illustrative of the situation:

> The dirty little room was littered with the Obeah man's stock in trade. A number of vials containing some sort of unholy liquor were lying ready to be handed over to some foolish negro in exchange for their weight in silver. In every corner were found the implements of his trade, feathers, bones of cats, parrots' beaks, dogs' teeth, broken bottles, grave dirt, rum, and egg-shells. Examining further, we found under the bed a large *conarie* or earthen jar containing an immense number of round balls of earth or clay of various dimensions, large and small, whitened on the outside and fearfully and wonderfully compounded. Some seemed to contain hair and rags and were strongly bound round with twine; others were made with skulls of cats, stuck round with human or dogs' teeth and glass beads, there were also a lot of egg-shells and numbers of little bags filled with a farrago of rubbish. In a little tin canister I found the most valuable of the sorcerer's stock, namely, seven bones belonging to a rattlesnake's tail—these I have known sell for five dollars each—in the same box was about a yard of rope, no doubt intended to be sold for hangman's cord, which is highly prized by the negroes, the owner of a piece supposed to be able to defy bad luck.

Contemporary practitioners also maintain stores of substances with which they perform their art, although not generally to the degree described by Bell.

Obeahmen tend to be skeptical of prospective clients and often refuse to help them or deny an ability to do so, until they are convinced of the person's sincerity and belief in the practice. For that reason, an individual desiring the services of an Obeahman is often introduced to him by a third person who already knows, and is known by, the practitioner. The client-practitioner relationship begins, generally, with the client describing his problem to the Obeahman and asking for the latter's professional help in alleviating it. The practitioner assesses the problem and, once convinced of the client's sincerity, prescribes a cure or performs it himself, in return for a given fee. The client then departs to execute his prescribed tasks and await the results of the Obeah magic.

The actual uses of Obeah, as well as the procedures employed and individual items used, varies considerably in contemporary contexts. Primarily, Obeah revolves around the practice of "setting a

fix'' on someone or something; that is, casting a spell on him (it). By ''fixing'' someone, the Obeah practitioner may, for example, cause the ''fixed'' individual to do what the client requests of him. The ''fix'' thus refers to the magic itself. The ''set'' (or ''setting a fix'') refers to the procedures and materials involved in carrying out a fix. Such procedures are also referred to as ''dressing'' an item. For example, gardens are said to be ''dressed with Obeah'' (Bell, 1970:2) to prevent the theft of their contents. When a practitioner is about to perform Obeah, the room in which he works must be ''dressed'' (prepared), often by placing a candle in each corner. One prepares an item, such as a candle, to make it susceptible to or focused toward the Obeah magic.

An Obeah fix is set through the medium of fetish objects. In contemporary Bahamian practices, important items include: candle wax, ''seals'' (tablets bearing foreign, ''mysterious'' inscriptions on them), religious books (particularly the *Bible, The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses,* and *Master Key),* grave dirt, egg shells, certain herbs, articles of clothing, and items from the victim's person. In addition a vast array of other mundane items may be used in any given instance. Poisons are not, today, heavily employed, although many potions comprised of ''bush medicines'' are used which may have somewhat deleterious effects on individuals. The objects or constituents are chosen because they are believed to have certain power, themselves, which is harnessed by the Obeahman, or because they are able to act as mediums for the practitioner's own power. Some items are used differently for black or white magic; some are used for either aspect. For example, in the context of black magic, passages from certain books are used, including *Seven Steps to Power, Black Guard, Seven Keys to Power* and *Master Key* (McCartney, 1976:87); whereas in white magic the *Bible* (particularly the Book of Psalms) is used.

The objects take their effect on the victims by being placed in their houses (often under their beds), sprinkled around their houses, buried under or in their walkways so that they step over them when leaving the house, or hung in a tree in their yards. Once the victim comes in contact with the item (whether knowingly or not), he will reputedly be affected by it, and the desired outcome of the fix will thus soon be achieved. In the context of negative Obeah (used as black magic), the outcome is said to entail such things as ''the loss of hair; unexplained swelling of the limbs or stomach; constant headaches or 'ringing in the ears'; unexplained outbreaks of boils or festering sores that do not respond to medication; the loss of the use of the limbs (not being able to walk, etc.) or deformity of the limbs, loss of sight,'' (McCartney, 1976:118), or sometimes even death. A common outcome professed for victims is that they will ''swell up and burst.'' To counteract the effects of a fix, individuals generally will consult a second Obeahman or-woman and receive a remedy from him/her in the form of curing substances or prescribed actions. Usually, the fix can be effectively countered in this way.

Obeah is used in solving a variety of problems—often in reference to crime dissuasion, romantic disputes, legal problems, revenge, finding lost articles, or curing ailments. A list of the kinds of results that reputedly may be obtained through Obeah is provided by Missick (1975:45):

Gain the love of the opposite sex
Unite people for marriages
Obtain property
Make persons do your bidding
Make persons love you, no matter who
Get any job you want
Make people bring back stolen goods
Make people lucky in any games
Cure any kind of sickness without medicine
Cast a spell on anyone no matter where they are
Get people out of lawsuits, courts or prison
Bring happiness to broken lives
Remove the sources of unhappiness

Such applications, or at least such intent, have been documented in informant interviews and written accounts of persons who have contracted for Obeah fixes or who have been victims of such fixes. The accounts may be used to graphically demonstrate the application of Obeah and its ef-

fects on believing individuals. While other, more "rational," explanations can often be given for occurrences attributed to Obeah, they do not diminish the value of Obeah explanations to some people.

Descriptions are given by several authors (e.g., Bell, 1948, 1970; Williams, 1970; McCartney, 1976) of the use of Obeah in protecting gardens and fields from thieves. An account published in 1905 describes a scene where Obeah had been set—a scene that is essentially the same as may be found today:

> At some of the islands, we found hanging to various fruit trees, fantastically draped bottles and sticks, which, we were informed, were charms to frighten away thieves and evil spirits. It is believed by the negroes that if any one but the rightful owners should eat the fruit from a tree on which this spell has been placed, he will swell up and burst. We were not fortunate enough, however, to see a demonstration of this remarkable effect (Penrose, 1905:415).

The contents of such bottles are reported by Bell (1970:4) as: "sea-water, with a little laundry blue in it, and . . . a dead cockroach floating on the top . . . some may have besides the cockroach, a few rusty nails and a bit of red flannel or such like. . . ." They may also contain a mixture of soil from a grave, floodtide water and a little air—earth, air and water elements that would have considerable combined power (Dupuch and Perfetti, 1961:34). Gardens may also be fixed by erecting a recognized Obeah sign—a diagonal red cross on a black background. It serves the same purpose as the bottles in warding off would-be thieves.

Obeah may be employed for detecting criminals, as well as dissuading people from illegal or antisocial activities. The following account is an example of situations in which positive Obeah is credited with bringing about justice:

> After Smith murdered his mistress, he took to the bush. Inagua had a lot of scrubland where the former Turks Islander could hide from his pursuers. An armed search party scoured the bush, but could find no trace of Smith. He thought he was safe.
>
> He was safe from ordinary searchers; but the old woman who attended his sweetheart's funeral told the other mourners that Smith would give himself up after six days.
>
> She told them so just after she had placed a fork, a stick and a stone in the coffin and had muttered a Creole incantation.
>
> Six days later Smith was found sitting on the steps of the courtroom. He was red-eyed and shivering in terror.
>
> I don' sleep for six day now," Smith complained. "Demon I can't see, he stick me wit' fork, hit me wit' stick and throw rocks at me." (Dupuch and Perfetti, 1966:92. 93).

In the context of romantic relationships and troubles Obeah may effect a reprisal against someone (often for revenge), or may be used in a positive, helpful sense. The following account, in which Obeah powers are supposedly involved in seeking revenge on a romantic rival, is paraphrased from a recent Nassau newspaper article (White, 1973:6). The incident began when two women had a heated agrument over the claim of one that her husband had been "sweet-hearting" the other woman. The other woman did not deny the charge, but said that it was the wife's fault for not satisfying her husband. The wife then shouted "Okay you going to get what you asked for. Between this day and tomorrow, you ger sleep under the cotton tree . . . that's right, you just as well go inside your house and put your burying gown on." Unknown to the other woman the wife had a reputation of being an Obeahwoman. The police had heard of the incident and were suspicious of the wife, so they kept watch over the other woman's house during the night. She lived alone and they saw no one enter or leave the premises that night. The next morning the woman was found dead in bed, and the cause of her death was unknown, although no obvious foul play was involved. The neighbors all were convinced that is was the wife's Obeah power that had caused the death.

In a more positive context, McCartney (1976:82) relates how an informant applied Obeah to bring about the return of client's wayward lover;

> This man used to run around a lot with sweethearts and used to be very cruel to his wife. In desperation, she went to a Haitian Obeah man who 'set a fix' for her . . . . The lady was in-

structed to put this 'set' under his pillow for three nights, as he slept, . . . and this was supposed to stop him from 'running around'. Unfortunately, the marriage deteriorated and the man continued to beat his wife and stay out with his sweethearts. She finally came to see me and I asked her to bring me the set that the Haitian had fixed. Well, when I saw this, a length of candle wax bent into a U-shape, I told her no wonder he stay away. You see, he set it to cross her and he had to continue going out. . . . I told her to leave it with me and then I reset it with the ends of the "U" overlapping. . . . Shortly afterwards, the woman came to see me, very excited. 'Ma husband home!' From that time up to the present, this man has completely changed his life and he is now a devoted husband.

The use of Obeah to solve romantic troubles may also precipitate the application of counter-Obeah, as in the following quote from Dupuch and Perfetti (1961:36,37).

Fixing married couples so they quarrel and separate is a device commonly employed by sweethearts (a local term referring to mistresses).

One brown-skinned Eleuthera woman hexed a man and his wife. She made a mixture of Guinea pepper, grave dirt and dry dog manure, and sprinkled it over their yard. The wife packed up the children, left everything else behind and went to Nassau to see an obeah man. The obeah man told her how the brown-skinned woman put a hex on the yard.

"You goin' to catch hell!" he told her.

"So what I mus' do?" she asked.

"You go bring me white hankie, one egg."

She brought them.

He performed a certain ritual with them, threw them away, and charged her £11 ($30.80) for his services. He gave her one small, orange-coloured package and told her to fasten it inside her dress over her bosom. He said she must never get it wet.

"Go home," he said. "Go to your house."

She did.

All went well until one day she went in swimming. She unpinned the package and put it up on a rock. The tide flowed in and carried it off. The same week, she and her husband started fussing again. She left him and never returned. He died.

The use of Obeah is reported in several incidents in which individuals attempt to use fetishes to obtain favorable verdicts in court. An informant states, for example, that such an outcome can be achieved by three methods. In one, the accused is instructed to walk backward on a grave, write the deceased person's name backward on a piece of paper, then put the paper in his shoe when he goes to court. By pressing on the paper during the trial he will supposedly make the prosecutor become confused and ruin his case. Similar results occur if the accused writes the prosecutor's name backward on a piece of paper, wraps the paper around an egg using new needles to secure it there, places the egg under the armpit or another concealed place, then presses the egg when the prosecutor speaks. Since the egg used is supposed to be fresh and uncooked, one can assume that the egg must break from time to time . . .! Certain oils rubbed on the accused person's body are said to harm the prosecutor's case when he walks near him. Portions of the Bahamian legal statutes that pertain to Obeah make specific reference to the use of such practices in courtrooms, as they are fairly common occurrences.

Obeah may be employed to effect revenge in innumerable situations where one party feels he has been intentionally wronged by another. In those situations it serves as an attempt to achieve retribution where, through the normal social and/or legal channels, such action is not obtainable for some reason. For example, Missick (1975:16-20) tells a story exemplary of the kinds of revengeful contexts in which Obeah might be used. His story entails a mother having a fix set on a teacher who hit her child unusually harshly. She had a book "fixed" with Obeah, then instructed her son to give it to the teacher. If the teacher accepted it, Obeah would supposedly work on the man and cause him to drown himself shortly thereafter. The teacher did not accept the book, however, and the boy was left with it. Soon after, the boy was himself drowned. The fix had thus "backfired" on his mother.

Obeah is called upon to relieve unexplainable, distressing situations which cannot be controlled by other means. Numerous stories occur in the Bahamas of "unnatural" happenings, such as the reportedly sudden appearances of objects or persons in abnormal locations (e.g., people passing through walls, showers of nails or rocks falling through solid roofs). To the individuals who believe the stories, the happenings usually are derived from Obeah and are alleviated by it. For example, McCartney (1976:63) relates:

> A patient of mine told me that, when she was seven years old, she was often awakened around midnight by moaning sounds that came from the upper partition of her room. These sounds would persist until the whole household would get up to investigate them. To their horror, one night they found a coffin in the living room of their house. They thought that someone was playing a terrible joke (prank) but this happening persisted over a period of months. They consulted their pastor who prayed for them and the house and also they consulted an Obeah woman who told them that it was a sperrid (spirit) that brought the coffin in the house. The Obeah woman promised them that she would ask the sperrid to leave them alone. This she evidently did, because a few days later the coffin no longer appeared in the house and the noises stopped.

The History of Obeah

Obeah is derived from West African practices of witchcraft which were transported to the Caribbean by African slaves. Some feel that in African societies witchcraft served as a means of coping with unexplainable or uncontrollable forces and events (Patterson, 1975). Among slave populations in the Bahamas and certain Caribbean areas, African institutions were officially suppressed by local governments. However, the need for some of them continued. The practices of witchcraft and sorcery as a means of maintaining social control went "underground": They continued to be practiced in a secret form throughout the Plantation period and after emancipation. Thus, in contemporary Bahamian society Obeah is engaged in by a subsegment of the population because it provides needed services to those persons, even though, officially, it is an illegal practice.

The word "Obeah," or "Obi" as it is sometimes called, comes from African terms related to some aspect of witchcraft. Various sources for the term have been suggested by researchers. Williams (1970:120) states that the word "Obeah is unquestionably derived from the Ashanti word Obayifo," which signifies "a wizard, or more generally a witch" (Rattray, 1916:48). Williams also states (1970:121) that by dropping its suffix the word "Obayifo" was shortened to "Obayi," which "was variously rendered by . . . whites as obeah, etc." The word was then shortened further to "Obi." Patterson, on the other hand, (1975:185, 186) states that "Obayifo is Twi in origin," and he suggests that another closely related Twi word, *obeye,* which refers to the spiritual beings that inhabit witches, is a more probable etymological antecedent of "Obeah." I feel that the antecedents of the Caribbean words are among these African terms, although which term is *the* source is undetermined, as there is such a close similarity in their sounds and meanings.

A popular interpretation of the phenomenon has it that in many West African societies witchcraft was a pervasive institution for maintaining social controls and interceding with suprahuman forces. The concept of witchcraft, in its African context, is defined as "a bad medicine directed destructively against other people, but its distinctive feature is that there is no palpable apparatus connected with it, no rites, ceremonies, incantations, or invocations that the witch has to perform" (Field, 1937:128). It thus involves the practice of black magic, and it is defined as an entity separate from white magic. Sorcery, which also involves black magic, is distinguished from witchcraft in that it makes use of fetish paraphernalia in order to affect some result. In Africian societies certain individuals were believed to possess and use supernatural powers, sometimes with the aid of fetish items, in negative or antisocial practices. Their practices were kept secret, but their effects were widely reckoned in any bad events that occurred. The threat of their power being unleashed against individuals who violated established rules served to control the social actions of the group.

It is assumed by several sources (Bell 1970, Williams 1970, McCartney 1976, and Patterson 1975) that, among the Africans transported to the Caribbean as slaves, there were some individuals who were intimately knowledgeable in witchcraft and sorcery, having secretly been involved in their practices in Africa. In the context of the Caribbean societies these practices were described as Obeah. Such practices were reported among slave populations on several Caribbean islands. Bell (1970:8,9) states, for example, that "Before the emancipation in 1834 . . . the practice of Obeah was rampant in all the West Indian colonies." In more recent works, Obeah has been documented in Jamaica, Haiti, Grenada, Martinique, Antigua, Sta. Lucia, and Barbados, as well as in the Bahamas. It has been quite prevalent particularly in Jamaica and Haiti.

Obeah developed as a secret institution in the Caribbean under the framework of the Plantation system. Obeah practitioners were generally ordinary slaves whose particular knowledge and abilities in the art went undetected by the slaves' owners. Within the context of slave society, Obeah was primarily used in "preventing, detecting and punishing crimes among the slaves" (Patterson, 1975:190), as well as being used to seek revenge against someone. The method of punishment quite often involved subtle poisonings from toxic herbs or compounds, or the administration of harmful substances such as slivers of glass. Obeah was most often practiced on fellow slaves (Brathwaith, 1971:157,158), however, it was also employed by slaves to inflict harm, through poisoning, on slave masters. In the latter capacity, Obeah served as one of the few means available to slaves to retaliate against the system of slavery and the cruel treatment of slave owners. "During the slave era many slave masters were afflicted with incurable sores, and many died, as a result of the deadly potions sprinkled on 'Massa's clothing or stirred into his food.'" (Cartwright, 1973:47). An account of such an occurrence is given by Brathwaite, (1971:157) quoting Marsden (1788:2).

> A neighbouring gentleman, as I hear, has now three negroes in prison, all domestics, and one of them grown grey in his service, for poisoning him with corrosive sublimate; his brother was actually killed by similar means. . . . Another agent, who appears to be in high favour with the negroes whom he now governs, was obliged to quit an estate, from the frequent attempts to poison him; and a person against whom there is no sort of charge of tyranny, after being brought to the doors of death by a cup of coffee, only escaped a second time by his civility, in giving the beverage, prepared for himself, to two young bookkeepers, to both of whom it proved fatal. . . .

The practice of Obeah was generally viewed by Caribbean governments as a threat to their social and political stabilities. Obeah was detrimental to the health and safety of individual members of the societies because of its use of poisons, and it was a menace because it invoked fear among the slaves. It was a more serious threat, however, to the political stability of the Plantation system. In addition to serving such rebellious purposes as the poisoning of slave owners, Obeah was used in actual slave insurrections. In 1760, Jamaican slaves who revolted briefly against plantation owners were led by Obeah men who used the supposed powers of their art to encourage the rebels. "The influence of the Professors of that art was such as to induce many to enter into that rebellion on the assurance that they were invulnerable, and to render them so, the Obeah man gave them a powder with which they were to rub themselves." (Williams, 1970:116, quoting *Report of the lords* . . ., 1789).

As a result of the Europeans' fear of the influence of Obeah among the slave populations, laws were enacted in the Caribbean to prohitit its practice. In Jamaica, for example, laws were passed in 1788, 1816 and 1826 that contained clauses dealing with Obeah (Williams, 1970:164,167). Persons found guilty of practicing Obeah, through the possession of Obeah-related paraphernalia or the administering of poison, were generally given harsh sentences. On many Caribbean islands, particularly those with large slave populations, the penalties were deportation or death. In the Bahamas the Plantation system was never as successful as on some other islands, and Obeah does not appear to have been as great a threat to governmental stability in that nation. Bahamian laws against Obeah apparently were not as harsh as elsewhere in the Caribbean (McCartney, 1976:73).

Legal sanctions against Obeah greatly reduced the widespread rebellious threat of the practice. However, they did not eradicate the practice, which has persisted in diminished forms into modern Bahamian and Caribbean societies. After the end of the Plantation period in 1834, Obeah became

less destructive in effect, with decreased emphasis on the actual poisonings of individuals. It also became more tame as it incorporated elements of Christian religion in some of its rites.

In the Bahamas, Obeah is still an illegal practice. The law, last enacted in 1929 (The statute of law. . ., 1929) retains Obeah as a punishable offense:

Practising Obeah, etc.

254. Whoever practises obeah, or by any occult means or by any assumption of supernatural power or knowledge intimidates or attempts to intimidate any person, or obtains or endeavours to obtain anything from any person, or pretends to discover any lost or stolen thing or the person who stole the same, or to inflict any disease, loss, damage or personal injury upon any person, or to restore any person to health, shall be liable to imprisonment for three months.

255. (1) If it is made to appear, upon the oath of any credible witness, that there is reasonable cause to suspect that any person is in possession of any article or thing used, or intended to be used, by him in the practice of obeah or such other practice as is mentioned in section 254, it shall be lawful for any justice of the peace, by warrant to cause any place whatever belonging to or under the control of the person to be searched, either in the day or in the night, and, if any such article or thing is found in any place so searched, to cause it to be seized and brought before him to be secured for the purpose of being produced in evidence in any case in which it may be required.

(2) Where any such article or thing is found as aforesaid, the person in whose possession the article or thing is found shall, unless and until the contrary is proved, be deemed to be a person practising obeah within the meaning of the said section, at the time at which the article or thing was so found.

256. If, on the hearing of any case before any court, the court has reasonable cause to suspect that the accused or any witness in the case then in court has concealed about him an instrument of obeah, the court may direct the police forthwith to search the suspected person without a written warrant, and if any instrument of obeah is found upon him, he shall be liable to a fine of five pounds.

(Bahama Islands: statute law . . . , 1965:992).

Some cases of prosecution for Obeah practice have occurred recently; for example, in 1971, two women from the United States were found guilty and fined $40, for engaging in Obeah and theft: "They were not aware that it was unlawful to practice the occult (in the Bahamas)" (*Nassau Guardian,* Tuesday, December 14, 1971, p.4). For the most part, however, the Bahamian government, as most other Caribbean governments, does not rigidly enforce the law in reference to Obeah, as the practice of Obeah today is on a much less severe scale and does not pose the social and political threats that it did during the Plantation period.

Current Status

When a Bahamian is willing to discuss Obeah and is asked the question: "Who was the greatest Obeahman in the Bahamas?", the answer will almost unfailingly be either "Pa Beah" or "Uncle Boy". The former, who died just a few years past, was Zaccharias Adderley. Pa Beah was the acknowledged "king" of Obeah in New Providence and almost all other practitioners reportedly paid him homage. In reality, Adderley was a truck farmer who lived in Fox Hill (a suburb of Nassau, where his former house can still be seen) and who took up Obeah as a kind of side-line, according to one of his disciples, "Killer" McCoy. The hobby soon proved to be more lucrative than farming and he evidently spent a goodly portion of his last 20 years as a full-time Obeahman. He was approximately 70 years of age at his death. He was, if nothing else, a bit of a pragmatist. It is reported that he once commented: "If people are stupid to gimme money I ain't too stupid not to take it". Wonderous stories of his feats are still related today, particularly feats which tend to show his cunning in bringing to justice those individuals who stole things from his gardens. All of his successes are attributed to Obeah practices.

"Uncle Boy", whose real name I have never learned, was the reigning Obeah monarch of Cat Island, where his fame is still extolled. Like Pa Beah, Uncle Boy was a farmer, with coconuts being his major crop. One famous story of his prowess at Obeah deals with his causing a man to "swell up" because he had stolen some of Uncle Boy's coconuts, but would not come forward and admit his crime. The thief continued to swell despite every effort to cure him and, ultimately, he died. Obeah had caused it.

These are but two of the real-life characters one encounters in the active folktales concerning Obeah. Today, the names one hears whispered are Mrs. Fowler, Phillip Lazaique, Mr. Rolle, "Old George" and "Killer". Each of these individuals is very real and, to one degree or the other, purportedly practice one form or the other of Obeah. Let us see, however, just how they performed during the 1979 field season during which time I had been promised I would see how and why Obeah works.

First, let us recall that Cat Island and Andros Island are reported to be the foci of the most pure forms of Bahamian Obeah today. On Cat Island, not one of the three individuals recommended to me by my prime informant in 1977 was to be found. Now, this may not seem too strange initially, but consider the fact that I was well known and came recommended by Bahamians as "a man you can trust—he one good mon". Having established myself within the infrastructure of Bahamian society over a period of some eight years, where everyone knows someone (and is generally related), there was/is no reason to even suspect that I would cause mischief or bring trouble to anyone. This was already known through my previous work and publications in and about the islands. Not only were the three Obeah practitioners not to be found on Cat, I literally could find no one who could suggest any specific individual now living there to whom I could even be introduced for the purposes of the study. And this is in one of the reputed cradles of Obeah.

Hence, I moved my scene of operations to Andros, the other bastion of Obeahdom. I knew that "Old George" was there and I had good reason to believe that he would see me with the introductions I brought. Imagine my delight to find that the rickety taxi, né stationwagon, lacking a functioning water pump, which met me at Andros Town's air strip was driven by an elderly gentleman who turned out to be none other than "Old George". During an interesting, almost brakeless ride with two stops for water in the radiator, I came to know the man very rapidly—not to mention his colorful vocabulary. After one week of interviews, interspersed with various monetary and liquid enticements, I learned essentially four things from this worthy: 1) Obeah was, indeed a "wery pow'ful t'ing"; 2) he had not practiced Obeah in years (he was reluctant, now, even to admit he once had done so); 3) he was recognized as a locally important concocter of bush medicine—as he put it, he "did bile good bush" (a fact corroborated by other local informants) and, 4) if I wanted to talk to a really good Obeahman (sic], I should see Miz Fowlah in Nassau. I turned in every direction possible in the local area to try to find someone—anyone—who actively practices Obeah today. Two expatriate Americans who run a hostelry in the vicinity also could not or would not give me any valid leads. Andros was, therefore, another washout in the venture.

Hence, I returned to New Providence and its capital, Nassau, still in the hope of witnessing some good, Bahamian brand of Obeah. I went to my good and valuable friend, Dr. Timothy McCartney, who had indicated his every willingness to aid in my quest, for he is also totally fascinated by Obeah and has written the only serious approach to the topic in the Bahamas. It is germane to note that McCartney (1976:79) lists only eighteen people claiming to be Obeah practitioners: 7 in New Providence; 2 from Cat Island; 3 from Andros; 2 from Haiti; 1 from Jamaica; 1 in Freeport, Grand Bahama; 1 from Eleuthera and 1 from Long Island. As a result of these interviews, McCartney notes (1976:80) that "Out of the eighteen Obeah practitioners interviewed, two of these greatly impressed me and appear to have extra sensory perception. . . . With the exception of these two practitioners, the rest were, to my mind, frauds, very clever "con" men and women doing a helluva business." This observation is doubly important to a white, American researcher since Dr. McCartney is both black and Bahamian, in addition to possessing the academic and research skills prerequisite to making such a judgment.

Back in Nassau, I turned my sights first on Mrs. Fowler, an erstwhile Obeahwoman resident in the Palmdale section of the city. I visited her place on three separate occasions, never to find anyone at home. On the third visit, through judicious inquiry, I was able to determine that "Miz

Fowlah's off de island''. No amount of inquiry could determine precisely where it was she had gone nor when she was destined to return. Another blank drawn.

Phillip Lazaique (or Luazzi or Lazeke) is a Guyanese about 35 years of age, evidently permanently resident in Nassau who has built up quite a following. I had been warned that Mr. Lazaique was ''difficult'' to see and he certainly lived up to his reputation. He simply refused to see me. It was indicated that he had no time to ''mess 'round with that man''. It is this same Mr. Lazaique who figured in a lead story in *The Tribune* dated September 26, 1975. The article was entitled ''Man Cleared of Obeah Charge''. It read, in part:

''Several boxes containing lucky powders, incense, bits and pieces of paper with names written upon them and a couple of men's underwear were ordered returned to a 32-year-old Guyanese spiritualist today when a lower court judge found nothing unusual about him haveing them.

What Philip Lazaique won't get back however is a fowl's egg with the names of several persons written on it. That exhibit, seized by officers who arrested the curly-haired Guyanese in July on an obeah practising charge was listed as destroyed, the court heard.

''Lazaique, who was represented by attorney Henry Bostwick, was freed after Chief Magistrate Mr. Wilton Hercules found there was a lack of evidence to prove the charge against him.

''I don't want you to feel that it is because obeah has been worked on me that you are being freed. It is only because of a lack of evidence' he said in dismissing the charge.

''Police detective Charles Moss told the court that he arrested Lazaique on July 28, after he executed a search warrant at the defendant's home.

''He found the defendant at home at the time with several women waiting in his living room and a woman with a baby with him in a bedroom that smelled of incense, Det. Moss said.

''Also found was a jacket with $457.22 and a sign reading 'No credit,' and 'Pay Half Down' and the other items including the egg, he said.

''Det. Moss said that he went to Lazaique's home after a complaint was made by a woman who said she paid him $3 to dress a candle but never received it.

''The woman had gone to Lazaique because she was having problems keeping her husband at home and away from other women, the court was told.

''Det. Moss, who said that he was satisfied that Lazaique was practising obeah for gain after speaking with him, had also produced a ledger which he said contained the names of the defendant's clients.

''The book included the names of several policemen, the Chief Magistrate himself, and also his other two colleagues on the bench, Magistrates George Hannays and Emmanuel Osadebay.

''Questioned by the magistrate after his evidence in chief, Det. Moss was asked whether he had ever visited a Roman Catholic church and seen their candles on the altar or the incense and holy water used in ritual.

''He had, he told the court, and also admitted further having common knowledge that people regularly go to the psychiatrists at the Mental Rehabilitation Centre because they have problems.

''In each case, it was never known why the priests or psychiatrists were never brought to court for practising obeah.

''He found that on the facts submitted in the case, he was not able to conclude that the defendant was practising obeah for gain. He said that Lazaique's statement to police also told the court that he was a spiritualist—'a person who helps people to solve their problems through prayers.'

''The mere possession of these items alone is not an offence, Mr. Hercules said, agreeing with an earlier submission made by Mr. Bostwick who said that there was no case made out against Lazaique.''

It is particularly interesting to note the inference in the article that members of the judiciary may avail themselves of the services of Obeah practitioners. Indeed, I have been told on four individual

instances by people in whom I have confidence that more than one member of the Bahamian Parliament regularly avail themselves of Obeah in reaching decisions of import to the nation. One Senator in particular reputedly never casts a vote without first consulting an Obeah practitioner for his opinion as to the effects of a given vote. I have no objective, concrete evidence to substantiate these statements, but I do submit there is little reason to doubt such facts, in that I personally know three Bahamians, all of whom are professional people, two of whom have college degrees, who regularly consult "spiritualists" (Obeah practitioners) for guidance in their lives. It is a bit disquieting to consider the possibility that semi-literate charlatans purporting to be quite omniscient may have a profound effect on the governance of a nation.

As for Mr. Rolle, Dr. McCartney dissuaded me from even visiting him, pointing out that in his book on Obeah (McCartney, 1976:70-73) he had quite well documented Rolle's role as a fraud insofar as the practice of Obeah is concerned. Mr. Rolle's *modus operandi* was to offer to cut cards (to read a fortune) or to read a palm, either activity costing $15.00. Reading the client's "shadow" (spirit) ran $20.00. He quite readily agreed to read McCartney's palm, however, for $10.00 when the latter indicated that he had only that amount of money. Mr. Rolle—who is of Haitian-Bahamian background—evidently combined a garble of patois and English in an incantation which McCartney recorded as "Hm. . .power. . .s'il tu plait, s'il tu plait, hm. . .eiee. . .s'il tu plait, s'il tu plait. . ." (McCartney, 1976:71). McCartney goes on to indicate that this gibberish continued for some time while Rolle pressed McCartney's hand in his. This entire procedure took place in the presence of two "magical" books placed on the floor, one in front of each of the client's feet. Written in French, the title of the books was "How to Become a Millionaire". . .Other than repeating preliminary information gleaned from McCartney in conversation, the man fabricated all sorts of things which he thought his client would want to hear. McCartney's assessment was that "I emerged into the bright Bahamian sunlight, with mixed emotions about how I was easily defrauded of my hard-earned $10 . . .".

This left Cubell "Killer" McCoy, a former heavyweight boxer and present-day truck gardener living in the Fox Hill area, near where Pa Beah resided. "Killer's" main claim to fame, aside from his purported ability at Obeah, is that he served as a sparring partner for Billy Conn and for Joe Louis in the late 1930s. He delights in showing his ham-like fist to the stranger who visits his sidewalk vegetable and fruit stand and one cannot help but be impressed if, for nothing else, the sheer physical presence of the now elderly gentleman. A gentle fellow, somewhat given to bragadoccio, he claimed in both 1977 and 1979 to have been a pupil of Pa Beah. Despite his offer, in 1977, to demonstrate some of his powers, only two vestiges were forthcoming. First was a view of the bottles and crosses (red on a black background, in traditional Obeah fashion) which he had placed to guard his garden from "t' iefing". He assured me that the presence of those symbols of power were quite effective. He also inferred that his tomatoes, which he proudly displayed, owed their fine quality to his mysterious abilities. I must admit that the tomatoes were well-formed and of excellent taste, but I suspect that the average-size fruit which they were acquired their quality from the rather liberal use of horse manure and obviously well-tended hills rather than to any occult reason. "Killer's" *piece de resistance* was to be a demonstration of how he could control animals through his will power. He indicated that he would use his own dog (perhaps not the most objective manner in which to demonstrate such power) and show how the dog would go, come, sit, talk (!), and run away simply by "Killer's" talking to him. What transpired was that his friendly, large old cur did, indeed, sit down and watch "Killer" intently as he gesticulated and ordered his dog to do various things, the dog cocking his head from side to side occasionally, scratched rather energetically and, finally, gave vent to a huge yawn before arising, sniffing at my feet, licking my hand and trotting off to perform a time-honored function at the nearest light pole. "Killer" muttered something to the effect that "de damned dog stupid" and that "de vibrations not right". "Killer" was obviously embarrassed, and no amount of cajoling, persuasion, and even a diplomatic offer of payment on my part could convince him to attempt some other demonstration of his Obeah powers. When I last saw him, he was muttering to himself and packing up his wares preparatory to leaving his stand, even though it was just mid-morning. It is important to remember that I did not approach him unaware, it was he who had offered to perform the demonstration for me.

This had exhausted all of the ready possibilities open to me for visiting with and witnessing the performance of an Obeah practitioner. There were left only three possibilities to make good on my intent to find at least one legitimate vestige of Obeah as a supernatural function.

First, Dr. McCartney had often spoken to me about a lady whom he described (McCartney, 1976:80) as an Obeah practitioner with whom he had "become very friendly. . . and [I] use her as my 'consultant' in occult psychology, when I deal with Obeah problems. I have found her to be honest, non-mercenary, and utilising, primarily, bush medicine and white magic." This lady, who must remain anonymous was, in 1979, 68 years of age and was born on Long Island, Bahamas. Her father was a native of Cat Island, and was reputed to be an excellent bush medicine man. It was from him that she learned at an early age to distinguish the various bushes and barks and their effects on the human body and mind. Her mother was originally from Long Island, but left her husband and daughter while living on Cat Island. This lady grew up under the influence and tutelage of her father and reportedly had "visions" from an early age. Her father originally passed them off as bad dreams, but eventually came to feel that his daughter was clairvoyant and referred to her as a "witch". McCartney recounts a series of events which occurred during a meeting with her (McCartney, 1976:81-85) which, if taken at face value, are indeed extraordinary. Those events are not directly germane here, for I never had the opportunity to meet this lady. Tim tried to set up a meeting for me, only to learn that the lady was in the hospital in very grave condition. Subsequently, it was learned that she had been transported to Miami to a hospiital there for further medical attention. Therefore, I have only at second hand the fact that she is capable of performing, or causing it to appear that, phenomenal events are taking place. While I respect Dr. McCartney's word and certainly have no reason to disbelieve him, I cannot say factually that this lady is any more capable at Obeah practices than any of the other figures purporting to possess the power.

What is particularly disgusting on today's Obeah scene is to see the commercial products which are being peddled by the frauds to their clientele. At exorbitant prices ($5 for a tiny bottle, for example), one can purchase such nostrums as "Fast Success" powder; "Lucky Dream Remembering Oil"; "Lucky Dream incense" and "Holy Spirit Bath". These items are all manufactured in Miami, Florida and are labeled as "curios", sold by Sonny Boy's Products or the St. John's Religious Store. The titles are more or less self-explanatory, the contents purporting to bring one good luck (e.g., at the race track or in one's love life) or to bring more money to the consumer, etc. Under no circumstance should these whimsical commercial products be confused with bush medicine, or even with "legitimate" items prepared by an Obeah practitioner.

One other incident of the 1979 field session deserves comment. On my arrival in Nassau, I was greeted by four acquaintances with the query "Why weren't you here in May when the things happened at the house on Collins Avenue?" Obviously, something important had happened, but I was in ignorance of just what. Through questions and the reading of back issues of *The Nassau Guardian,* the following story emerged. An elderly couple called the police to inform them of some very strange and frightening happenings at their modest home. As pieced together, a pair of shoes—sans person wearing them—was walking down the sidewalk outside the house; on the interior of the home, rocks were flying through the air and had broken out the glasses of a commode (a small china cupboard) as well as breaking a dresser mirror in the bedroom; a very strong stench of old urine prevailed in the bedroom and a disembodied penis had spoken to the old gentleman. A large crowd of curiosity seekers got word of the weird happenings and, in effect, stormed the house, breaking down the fence, smashing the exterior front door, and trampling what grass there had been. Police estimated that over 2,000 people were surrounding the dwelling at one point and riot-control procedures had to be put in effect. Newspaper accounts averred that several clergymen and an African "witch-doctor" who was lecturing in Nassau at the time had visited the home, but had no explanation for the happenings.

These events could not help but pique my curiosity, so I spoke with some contacts within the Criminal Investigation Department of the police, and talked with other informants about the situation preparatory to visiting the house. I discovered that the gentleman of the house, an elderly Cat Islander, was prone to overuse alcohol; that he had previously "seen things" when under the influence, and that it was suspected that a charge for admission to the house was to be levied when the miraculous happenings were known. It was theorized that the scheme was, in one sense,

too successful and that the onslaught of the crowd previously mentioned completely unnerved the man and his wife. It is significant that only one other person, a young policeman—and a relative of the principal character in this story—claims to have seen anything untoward about the house that night. And whatever the strange thing was that the young man professed to have seen was never specified.

Nonetheless, as the "visiting expert", I was goaded to visit the house and, I must admit, it did not take too much persuading for I, too, was curious. I arrived at the house at about 11:00 a.m. to find the occupants, the elderly couple and their 30-year old mentally retarded son, taking the air on the front porch of the house. Evidences of the damage by the crowd were still to be seen—the trampled lawn, broken-off flowers, smashed door. I was cordially offered a stool and sat to talk with them. It very soon became obvious that the old fellow had already been sampling some form of alcohol rather liberally, but he was basically coherent in speech. His wife, perhaps also affected by the bottled spirits, soon launched into a tirade against her husband and "all those others" for ruining her flower garden and for "breakin' up de doh". After he had rather abruptly silenced her with a verbal admonition as to what might befall her if she did not "shut her mouth", he then launched into a litany about the poverty in which they lived and how much they needed money. After about one-half hour of this type of conversation, I finally was able to steer the talk back to the mysterious happenings and they agreed to let me see the interior of the house and to show me the precise places where things were broken, etc.

First I was shown the dish commode which had had its glass smashed out by the flying rocks. Interestingly, not one of the nine panels where glass should have been in the small (approximately 1.5 meters tall x 75 centimeters wide) cabinet had any glass at all. The piece was obviously hand-crafted, and unfinished. Not one sherd of glass was to be seen around or in the piece of furniture and examination of the mortice work with a 10x Hastings Triplet loupe failed to reveal any sign of glass ever having been installed in the cupboard. The lady of the house indicated that she had swept out the broken glass, although the appearance of the floors throughout the home tended to cast doubt on the frequency of any sweeping.

Next, I inspected the dresser where the mirror was reportedly broken out by rocks. This piece of furniture was an inexpensive, commercially manufactured item and, indeed, had a stand on which a mirror should have been. Again, there was no sign of any sherd of glass or glass splinters to be found. Further, the stand on which the mirror should have been mounted had no mortice work to receive a mirror, but was backed with a cardboard to which inexpensive mirrors are routinely glued on this type of furniture. There was no indication of any type of glue ever having been on the carboard which leads one to question if any mirror had ever been present. As was the case with the dish commode, there was absolutely no denting, scraping, abrasion or other mark which one might expect to find from rocks hitting an object with some force, nor were there any scratch marks from the putative broken glass.

The rocks had mysteriously flown through the air smashing glass, but had not hit any of the occupants. This was attested to by both the man and woman; the son is incapable of intelligible speech. Both people also agreed, in answer to my question, that rocks had showered down on the roof of the house. I then asked if I might see some of the rocks. Alas, they had all been thrown out. Where? In the garden. Could he point out any one of them to me? No, they all look alike lying with the other gravel in the garden. Might I then borrow the ladder I had seen leaning against the back of the house to view the roof and, perhaps, pick up one of the stones that had rained down? Again, unfortunately, the ladder probably would not hold my weight and, besides, all of the rocks had also been removed from the roof. . .At this juncture, my notes trail off and I must admit that I did not record exactly what it was the the disembodied penis said to the old fellow. As to the stench of urine in the bedroom, I found no reason to doubt that fact. It was a most non-productive, if somewhat bizarre and sad experience. The old man, even given the opportunity to lay some of the happenings to an Obeah "fix" opined that Obeah was no factor in the situation.

One thing that has become most apparent is that traditional Obeah practices are, minimally, on the wane if not at the point of extinction. Some of the superficial trappings are extant, e.g., bottles hanging in trees to prevent theft of fruit; "grave" dirt for "fixes"; potions for curing ills; wax "fixes", etc. However, the overall picture seems to be that self-proclaimed Obeah practitioners are

nothing more than palmists, fortune-tellers, seers, and other charlatans who are more than ready to relieve their clients of hard-won cash. Owing to the excruciatingly low level of income in Haiti, as one example, there has been an influx of Haitians into the Bahamas, bringing with them a built-in reputation for black magic or "voodoo". In fact, an unsophisticated and informal count of so-called Obeahmen in Nassau leads me to believe that the majority of the practitioners are Haitian in origin, with liberal sprinklings of other Caribbean or circum-Caribbean nationalities also having set up shop.

Consultations with an Obeahperson of any type are typically expensive, with prices for the simplest of consultations ranging from $20 to $50 today. I have been informed, although I have no first-hand corroboration of the fact, that charges of up to $500 for services rendered are not uncommon. I have good reason to believe that one distressed lady, working in a governmental position in the Bahamas, paid a total of $1500 for a series of meetings with a practitioner to help her alleviate some severe emotional problems she incurred as a result of a broken marriage. I gather that the practitioner, the name of whom my informant would not divulge, is either Haitian or claims to get his "powers" from Haitian connections. I further gather that he must be quite insightful into human problems and frailties and perhaps did serve in a helpful counseling role with this particular lady. She claims complete "cure" from her mental distress. Perhaps the end result justifies the means in some cases, but good psychological counseling which is readily available in Nassau would have cost her substantially less with the same probable end results and a certain security of knowing the psychologist would be there at any time he was needed. Obviously, given the technical illegality of Obeah and the naturally transient nature of many of today's practitioners, one cannot count on finding his/her practitioner available from one day to the next.

It is my distinct impression and opinion that Obeah as earlier described in this paper has virtually ceased to exist. The youth of the Bahamas are becoming less and less sanguine about any real belief in Obeah; the overall population is becoming more cosmopolitan in outlook; hundreds of thousands of foreign tourists flowing in and out of the major ports have substantially altered the social outlook of the Bahamians; the "Out Islands" are steadily being drawn into a cohesive national identity and the mainstream of world view; educational standards are rising; medical practice is improving by leaps and bounds. In short, Obeah as such either has become, or soon will reach the status of being an anachronism in the Bahamas.

Some Obeah-Connected Superstitions

The residual belief in Obeah among Bahamians is complementary to their beliefs in numerous minor superstitions. Such superstitions are similar in nature to those occuring in many parts of the world, but definitely connected to Obeah in the minds of many. Bahamian examples include such beliefs as:

To Avoid punishment, pull out an 'eye winker' (eye lash), throw it over your shoulder after spinning around three times.

If your big toe is shorter than your second toe your Father will die before your Mother.

If you point a finger at the dead or at a graveyard, your finger will rot off very shortly.

When your ears are ringing, it means that your lover is talking about you.

When couples are married, if their wedding day is very rainy, then the couple will never be happy.

Whenever there is a screeching cricket in the corner of a house, this is a sign of death.

(McCartney, 1976:158,162,164).

In addition, many other superstitions revolve around "sperrids" (spirits), graves, "catching shadows" (saving in a bottle the last breath, or spirit, of a dying person) and other subjects related to death and dying.

Substantial portions of Bahamian society adhere to these superstitions concerning everyday occurrences, and this lends strongly to the belief in more involved superstitions incorporated within Obeah. This pattern also helps to explain the highly diverse nature of Obeah. The broad framework

of superstitious beliefs allows for a wide range of occurrences to be "explained" by superhuman causes. Thus, people are willing to accept a great variety of different situations as being Obeah-derived or -alleviated, although this appears to be limited more and more to the older elements of the population, especially those over the age of about 50.

Conclusion

In the Bahamas, traditional Obeah has historically provided a useful social function by bringing some measure of control (or attempts at control) to situations that are normally uncontrollable. It has provided a means by which ordinary members of society can affect events in their lives, through the application of its practices that are, or were, believed to have the power to influence such events. Its validity as a viable course of action rests on the credibility of the Obeah practitioners and their ability to bring about desired results. Their credibility is maintained, in some respects, by their use of bush medicine, which does have actual healing capabilities, and by their ability to perceive and assess their clients' problems and the latters' faith in the results of Obeah. Foremost, traditional Obeah depends on the fact that a certain group of people strongly believe, and want to continue believing, in its power and abilities. There are some contemporary Obeah practitioners who take advantage of their clients' faith, purposely deceiving them with useless (or even harmful) remedies. However, for those segments of the society who manifest a strong faith in Obeah, it appears to be a valid and socially useful practice—that is, in its helpful forms. It is certainly an intriguing practice, even to those not quite so faithful.

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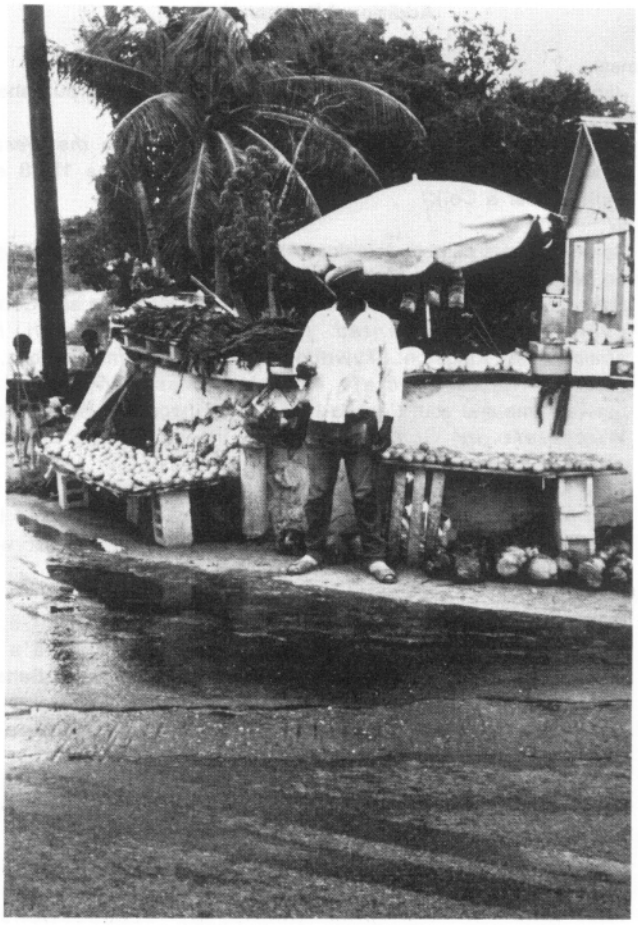

Plate 1. A self-proclaimed Obeahman, Cubell "Killer" McCoy, at his produce stand.

Plate 2. A mango tree that has been ''Fixed'', to deter the theft of fruit.

Plate 3. Former home of Pa 'Beah, deceased "king" of Obeahmen on New Providence.

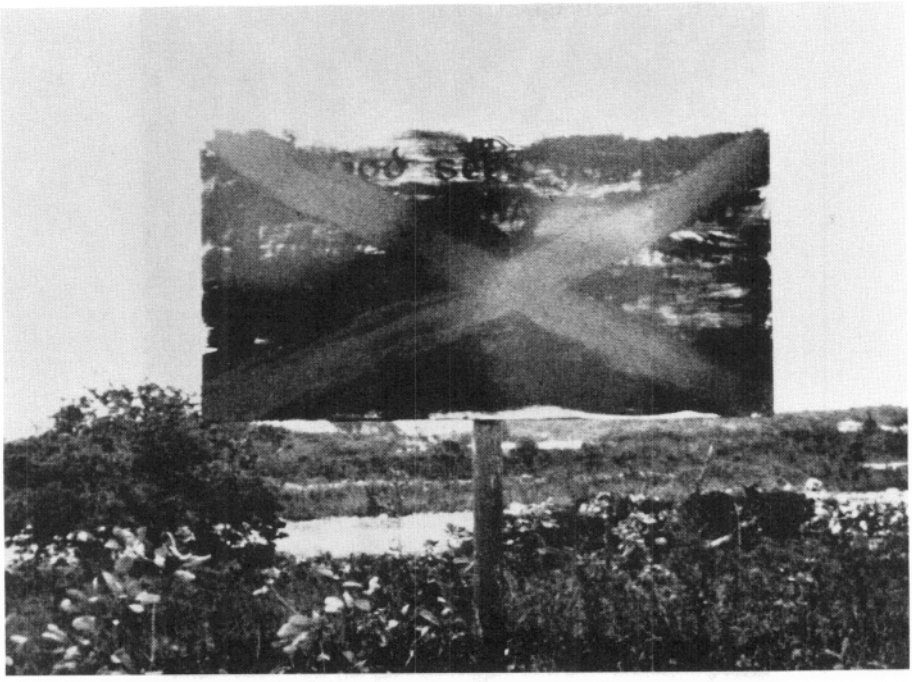

Plate 4. An Obeah "Flag" to discourage trespassing on private land. A red cross on black background. Lettering says, in part, "God sees you".

Plate 5. Amidst scenery and atmospheres like this, Obeah once fluorished throughout the Bahamas.

Plate 6. A selection of the nostrums peddled by present-day, purported "obeahmen".

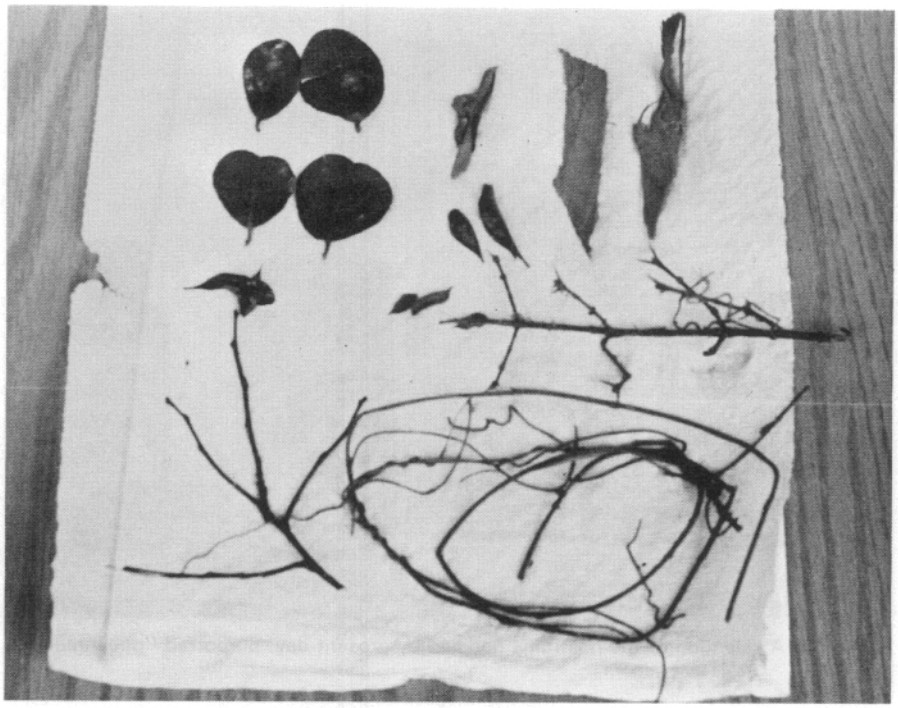

Plate 7. The constituents of a concoction of "Sexy Batch" (see text for details), a bush-medicine currently being sold on various islands of the Bahamas.

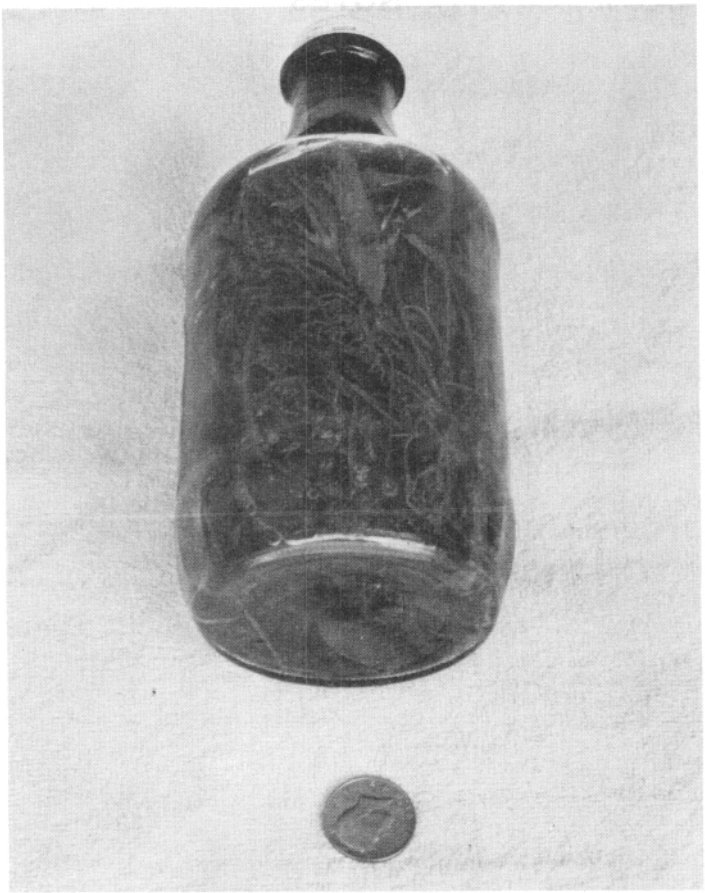

Plate 8. A bottle full of "Sexy Batch". The constituents shown in Plate 7 are steeped in water to produce the brew.