“THIS BAD BUSINESS”: OBEAH, VIOLENCE, AND POWER IN A NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH CARIBBEAN SLAVE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

RANDY M. BROWNE: “This Bad Business”: Obeah, Violence, and Power in a Nineteenth-Century British Caribbean Slave Community
(Under the direction of John Wood Sweet)

This thesis examines the practice of Obeah—an Afro-Caribbean system of healing, harming, and divination through the use of spiritual powers—within two slave communities in Berbice and Demerara (British Guiana). This study is based primarily on legal documents—including testimony from more than a dozen slaves—generated during the criminal trials of two men accused of practicing Obeah in 1819 and 1821-22. In contrast to most previous studies of Obeah, which have been based largely on descriptions provided by British observers, this project takes advantage of this complex, overlapping body of evidence to explore the social dynamics of Obeah as experienced by enslaved men and women themselves, including Obeah practitioners, their clients, and other witnesses. This study reveals that Obeah rituals could be extremely violent, that Obeah practitioners were feared as well as respected among their contemporaries, that the authority of Obeah practitioners was based on demonstrable success, and that slave communities in general were complex social worlds characterized by conflict and division as well as by support and unity—conclusions that combine to produce a fresh, humane vision of Afro-diasporan culture and community under slavery.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

On August 8, 1821, the manager of Op Hoop van Beter, a large coffee plantation in the British colony of Berbice (Guiana), discovered that an enslaved woman named Madalon had disappeared. That morning, when Madalon failed to show up for her daily tasks the manager “sent every where in search of her, but she was not to be found.”¹ Later that day, Madalon’s husband, who lived on a nearby plantation, received a note informing him that Madalon had apparently run away. He traveled to Op Hoop van Beter and asked everyone he encountered there what had happened to his wife; but no one was willing to give him any details, and he left without locating her. Rumors circulated across the area’s plantations for the next month, but the cause of Madalon’s disappearance remained a secret guarded by a small group of people who lived on Op Hoop van Beter or nearby estates. But then, a local militia commander and planter, William Sterk, caught wind of some alarming information: he heard from a local slave named Vigilant that Madalon had not run away. She had been killed during a clandestine Obeah ritual.²

¹ Trial of Slave in Berbice, For the Crime of Obeah and Murder, Proceedings of the Court of Criminal Justice of the Colony, in British Parliamentary Papers, 1823, XVIII.505, 17.

² Sterk was the “burgher officer of the river division” in the Berbice militia, and the owner of a plantation called Nomen Nescio. Vigilant lived on a neighboring estate called Middleburg’s Welvaaren. Ibid., 5, 25, 23, 22.
“It was whispered to me,” Sterk told officials, “that the woman Madalon was killed by the directions of a negro, named Willem…on an occasion of his having danced the Mousckie dance,” an Obeah ritual also known as the Minje Mama dance that had been prohibited in Berbice for some time. As soon as Sterk heard this troubling news, he commandeered Vigilant and went looking for Willem. Together they went to Op Hoop van Beter, where Vigilant knew just where to find Willem: he was in one of the “negro-houses” with Johanna, a young woman who was his “wife.” Sterk immediately took Willem into custody, and, after asking the plantation manager’s permission, also took Johanna and “the head-drivers and workmen of the estate” with him before making the trip down the river to New Amsterdam, the colonial capital, where he made a deposition to the Fiscal—Berbice’s judicial authority—and handed over his prisoners. The search for Madalon, the runaway slave, had thus transformed into a search for her corpse and her murderer, and colonial officials quickly launched a formal investigation into the alleged murder and Willem’s practice of Obeah on the plantation. This criminal inquiry culminated in a months-long trial that solicited testimony from more than a dozen individuals, most of them enslaved men and women who lived on or near Op Hoop van Beter and knew Willem or Madalon. In the end,

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3 It is unclear exactly what sort of relationship existed between Willem and Johanna, or when it began. The testimony of Baron, for example, is somewhat vague: “When this man, Willem of Buses Lust, first came upon the estate…he made acquaintance with the girl, Johanna, whom he had afterwards for his wife.” However, Willem told the court that Johanna was his wife, and Sterk referred to Johanna as Willem’s wife when he took her into custody. *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 13-14, 21.

the Fiscal charged Willem not only with masterminding Madalon’s murder, but also with practicing Obeah. In nineteenth-century Berbice, Obeah was a capital crime.\(^5\)

The fact that the Fiscal found it necessary to try Willem for another crime, in addition to murder, suggests that colonial officials perceived whatever had happened on Op Hoop van Beter to be more complicated than the untimely death of an enslaved woman. This was not simply a case of murder: this was murder by Obeah. Indeed, most of the Fiscal’s investigation centered on the Obeah rituals he suspected Willem of having performed. The extensive, richly detailed trial documents generated by the Fiscal’s investigation into Madalon’s murder therefore provide a rare opportunity to approach the study of Obeah from a fresh perspective. Instead of relying on accounts provided by slaveowners or other whites who rarely saw and never participated Obeah, this trial testimony opens a window into Obeah as seen by enslaved people who actually practiced or witnessed different Obeah rituals. The Fiscal’s exhaustive investigation resulted in the collection of nearly forty pages of typewritten, single-spaced trial testimony, much of which consists of detailed descriptions of Willem’s actions as an Obeah practitioner. Similarly valuable documents generated during the trial of another Obeah practitioner in 1819 provide an opportunity to place the rituals Willem conducted in a wider context. To my knowledge, there is no better window through which to see how Obeah functioned as a lived spiritual and cultural practice among enslaved people in the British Caribbean.

We need to listen to the voices preserved in these documents carefully, particularly because they do not speak to us directly. Few of the witnesses testified voluntarily, and many of them were subjected to some form of torture or the threat of physical violence, revealing what they knew only after significant coercion. After all, violence was one of the primary ways that whites tried to control enslaved people, and the judicial system was no exception. The Fiscal’s ability to torture enslaved people in nineteenth-century Berbice also reminds us that in this society planters were not the only people invested with the legal authority make their power felt on the bodies of slaves.

If the trial record is a product of coercion, it is also one of translation. Even if the Fiscal’s secretaries attempted to record each witness’s testimony verbatim, language barriers between some enslaved people and judicial officials sometimes made it difficult to do so. As one historian explained, in this time period “the British colonial presence…had to deal with an enslaved population whose lingua franca was Berbice Dutch,” a creole dialect carried over from the days of Dutch colonization and one that many British people had trouble understanding.6 When missionary John Wray visited Op Hoop van Beter to preach to the slaves who lived there, he noted that “The Negroes do not understand English…[and he] spoke to them in Creole Dutch.”7 Language barriers during the Fiscal’s investigation prompted him to rely on the services of “G. Schwartz, interpreter in the English and Creole languages,” which suggests the testimony of some witnesses probably passed through several


stages of translation and alteration before being committed to the written (English) record. And yet, the presence of certain words and phrases in Berbice Dutch and the frequent use of the first-person in the trial record suggest that colonial secretaries attempted to record testimony precisely. The need for translators and the presence of non-English words in the trial record also reveal that in the 1820s Berbice was a culturally and demographically complex society, where recently arrived African captives, creole slaves, and British planters all routinely encountered others whose languages they could not understand and whose cultures were foreign to them. The African-derived terms and phrases in Berbice Dutch have also allowed linguists and historians to hypothesize about the regional and cultural origins of African captives taken to Berbice. Based largely on linguistic analyses, scholars have persuasively shown, for example, that the majority of the earliest enslaved immigrants to Berbice—those who perhaps had the single largest impact on the creole slave culture that eventually developed in that colony—spoke some form of Eastern Ijo, a language used in parts of the Niger River delta and the Bight of Biafra.

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8 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 9.

9 Lean, who has used the Fiscal’s reports more extensively than any other historian, has argued that “These particular documents…are surprisingly candid,” and that because they often seem to reflect spoken language they are as close as we can hope to get to the voices of enslaved people. “The Secret Lives of Slaves,” 30-33.

10 As Gill has noted, at the beginning of the nineteenth there were three cultural-linguistic categories of people among the enslaved population of Berbice: recently arrived African captives, slaves brought from other areas in British West Indies, and creolized slave residents who had lived in the colony since the days of Dutch rule. See “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 317.

The Op Hoop van Beter trial record is related to a larger body of rare and valuable evidence that exists for no other Anglo-American slave society: the Fiscal’s reports. Berbice and neighboring Demerara-Essequibo were the only British colonies within the western hemisphere to have the institution of the Fiscal, a powerful official responsible for both hearing the complaints of slaves (e.g. that they had been denied the standard allotment of food; that they had been punished to severely or without cause, etc.) and for prosecuting slaves accused by managers or overseers of committing various crimes. Soon after the Dutch established plantation slavery in Berbice in the seventeenth century the Fiscal became an important institution, and when the British took possession of Berbice in the early nineteenth century they continued the institution.12 Fortunately for historians, testimony given before the Fiscal from 1819 on was recorded and survives to this day.13 These reports are remarkably rich, and, as one historian who has used them extensively claims, “as far as evidence is capable of representing what a slave had said in the early nineteenth century; this is as good as it gets.”14 Other valuable bodies of evidence also exist for Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo in this period, primarily as a result of the increased surveillance and improved record-keeping that resulted from growing abolitionist and missionary pressure to end or ameliorate slavery in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Sources such as punishment logs and slave registration returns—which provide detailed information on


13 The Fiscal did not begin to keep written records of witness testimony or of his legal decisions until 1819, when Henry Beard, the newly appointed governor, recommended that the Fiscal keep such records. See Gill, 53, n116.

individual slaves—present additional opportunities to examine this unique slave society in remarkable detail.\textsuperscript{15} Few, if any, Anglophone slave societies are so richly documented.

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The ways that historians of slavery have come to understand Obeah have been largely shaped by the views of elite British observers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most slaveholders and other Europeans used “Obeah” as a sort of catchall term for any non-Christian spiritual practice or “magic” practiced by enslaved people and believed to be of African origin.\textsuperscript{16} Although it is unclear exactly when “Obeah” first entered the English language, it was well established in Barbados by the 1720s and 1730s, if not earlier, and by the late-eighteenth century references to Obeah could be found across the British Caribbean and in England. Slaveholders and colonial officials frequently associated Obeah with poisoning, witchcraft and other antisocial practices, which resulted in a persistent stigmatization of Obeah practice that continues to the current day.

Despite these negative connotations, for much of the eighteenth century slaveholders tolerated or ignored Obeah, since they were largely unconcerned with enslaved peoples’ spiritual practices and made little efforts to convert them to Christianity.\textsuperscript{17} “Whites in

\textsuperscript{15} Slave registration returns were meant to help identify enslaved people who had been illegally imported to British territories after the British stopped participation in the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. Officials in Berbice did not begin the process of registering slaves, however, until 1817. See B.W. Higman, \textit{Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 6-8.


\textsuperscript{17} As Joseph Williams, one of the first historians of Obeah, explained, “up to the rebellion of 1760, Obeah occasioned nothing more than scornful myth at the absurd superstitions of the blacks” in Jamaica. \textit{Vooeoods and Obeahs: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft} (New York: Dial Press, 1932), 118.
Jamaica,” historian Vincent Brown explains, “often referred casually to the magical practices of the enslaved. Before 1760 whites considered these practices to be a generally harmless and bizarre feature of slave life, not unlike witchcraft and conjuring in Europe.” This dismissive attitude toward Obeah, however, would soon change dramatically.

The turning point came in 1760, when a slave rebellion supported by Obeah rituals and unprecedented in scale shook Jamaican planters out of their complacency and prompted them to make the practice of Obeah a capital crime. Known as Tacky’s Revolt (or Rebellion) this was the largest slave uprising that the British had experienced up to this point and, according to one historian, “in its shock to the imperial system, the 1760 rebellion was not to be equaled until the Jamaican rebellions of 1831 and 1865 or the Indian mutiny of 1857.”

As Edward Long, an elite Jamaican planter and politician, realized, by any measure of comparison the revolt was “more formidable than any hitherto known in the West Indies.”

The rebels terrorized the Jamaican plantocracy for months and killed some sixty whites before the rebellion was controlled. Between 300 and 400 slaves died in battle or committed suicide before being captured, and Jamaican officials severely punished any rebels they were able to capture alive. In the wake of the revolt they executed some one hundred slaves—after first torturing many of them—and arranged for the “transportation” of another 500 or so away from the island.

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18 Brown, The Reaper’s Garden, 145.
21 Craton, Testing the Chains, 138.
Whites quickly learned that the rebellion’s leader, an enslaved West African man named Tacky, had consulted Obeah practitioners in preparation for revolt. Tacky and his fellow rebels turned to Obeah practitioners to use their special powers to protect the rebels from bullets and, before the revolt began, they administered a binding loyalty oath. The rebels’ faith in Obeah and conviction that these rituals would protect them presented a serious problem for slaveholders obsessed with maintaining order and discipline. The lesson the British learned in 1760—that Obeah could be the precursor to violent political action—prompted them to begin serious efforts to eradicate the practice of Obeah, in the name of combating slave resistance. Almost immediately, they passed legislation that made the practice of Obeah a crime punishable by transportation or death. Nevertheless, as one slaveholder lamented several years later, “neither the terror of this law, the strict investigation which has ever since been made after the professors of Obi, nor the many examples of those who from time to time have been hanged or transported, have hitherto had


24 Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 138. According to Long’s summary of “the Jamaica Code Noir, or Laws affecting Negro and other Slaves,” a 1760 law stated that “Obeiah-men, pretended conjurors, or priests, upon conviction before two justices and three freeholders of their practicing as such, to suffer death, or transportation, at the discretion of the court.” *The History of Jamaica*, 2: 489.
the desired effect.”25 In Jamaica, and elsewhere, slaveholders found it impossible to put an end to the practice of Obeah.

Other British colonies soon passed similar anti-Obeah acts, which usually called for severe punishments—including death and deportation in many cases—for anyone found guilty of practicing Obeah or conspiring with Obeah practitioners.26 In Berbice, legislators passed anti-Obeah laws in 1801 and 1810, and by the 1820s “practising obeah” was one of several dozen offences that owners and managers routinely recorded in plantation punishment logs there and in neighboring Demerara.27

In the wake of Tacky’s revolt, whites across the British Caribbean began to assume that Obeah was almost exclusively tied to slave resistance and therefore depicted Obeah as a spiritual or cultural practice mobilized primarily in order to harm whites. Much scholarship has therefore understandably emphasized Obeah’s recognized role in enslaved peoples’

25 Bryan Edwards, History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies (London: John Stockdale, 1794), 302-03.

26 For example, legislation outlawing Obeah was passed in Belize in 1791, in Dominica in 1799, in Trinidad in 1800, in St. Vincent in 1803, and in Barbados in 1806. By the time slavery ended, nearly all British Caribbean colonies had enacted laws against Obeah, many of which remain on the books today. For a useful summary and analysis of laws passed against Obeah and legal action taken against people suspected of practicing Obeah, see Stewart, Three Eyes for the Journey, 36-40, 44-46; and Diana Paton, “Interpreting Spiritual Power in the Era of the Slave Trade: ‘Obeah’, ‘Poisoning’, and ‘Witchcraft’ in the Caribbean” (unpublished paper, University of Newcastle, 2008), 7. I would like to thank Diana Paton for sharing this and other valuable not-yet-published works with me.

27 Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 355; “Abstract of Offences Committed by Male and Female Plantation Slaves in the Colony Berbice….” in Copy of Any Reports Which May Have Been Received From the Protectors of Slaves In the Colonies Demerara, Berbice, Trinidad, St. Lucia, the Cape of Good Hope and Mauritius...Part II.—Berbice (London: House of Commons, 1831), 19-20; and “List of Offences committed by Male and Female Plantation Slaves in the Colony of Demerara and Essequebo….” in Copy of Any Reports Which May Have Been Received From the Protectors of Slaves In the Colonies of Demerara, Berbice, Trinidad, St. Lucia, the Cape of Good Hope and Mauritius...Part I.—Demerara, (London: House of Commons, 1831),14-15, 18. The practice of Obeah was probably more widespread than punishment logs suggest. According to Lean, “The seriousness of Obeah dictated that any summary punishment for its practice by a manager on a plantation was often inappropriate. Thus, it was rarely mentioned in the punishment record books. Where the practice was definitely discovered or suspected, the case was referred by the manager to the Fiscal for official prosecution.” See “The Secret Lives of Slaves,” 238.
efforts to resist slaveholders, at times celebrating Obeah as a form of African spirituality that enabled the enslaved to resist their oppressors. Indeed, many scholars have not challenged contemporary British assumptions regarding Obeah’s supposed link to slave resistance. Although Obeah was frequently used as a means of inspiring or supporting slave revolts and other forms of resistance, a singular focus on Obeah’s role in slave-master conflict prevents historians from seeing other ways in which enslaved people used different Obeah rituals within their own communities.

If the British saw Obeah as nothing more than witchcraft or magic—commonly employed to support slave revolt—why not just prosecute rebellious slaves or those who practiced Obeah under existing laws against insurrection or witchcraft? Historian Diana Paton has confronted this problem, and has argued that although the Jamaican anti-Obeah act of 1760—the harbinger of future legislation—drew on English and Christian conceptions of witchcraft, legislators could not risk allowing Obeah to be seen as mere witchcraft. By the eighteenth century, elite or learned Europeans saw belief in witchcraft as a harmless practice or evidence of superstitious, less-sophisticated persons—something to be mocked instead of feared. It was therefore necessary for the British make Obeah a distinct crime if it was to be taken seriously instead of treated dismissively.²⁸ British colonists essentially created a new category of crime—applicable only to culturally different, non-Christian Africans and their descendants.²⁹ As Paton explained, “obeah itself is a construct produced through colonial (and postcolonial) law-making and law-enforcement over more than two centuries.”


In no small way, British colonial legislators “invented” Obeah, which they saw not as any particular African religious or spiritual practice but as a crime committed by supposedly superstitious Africans or blacks. Before “voodoo” entered the English vocabulary, the British used “‘Obeah’ to signify whatever forms of supernatural beliefs and religious practices the British encountered among the slaves.” As one scholar explained, “Europeans applied the term, with its negative signification, to virtually any African religious practice they observed or heard about.” Therefore, the fact that the British labeled a certain belief or practice “Obeah” tells us very little about the actual meanings associated with specific African or Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices. Instead, it only tells us that the British sought to distance themselves from the cultural and spiritual practices of slaves and criminalize those practices which they feared the most.

Historians have reacted in two markedly different ways to negative British stereotypes of Obeah. Although some historians have accepted or reinforced British views, many more have offered competing interpretations and have sought to “rewrite obeah as resistance and/or indigenous knowledge,” as Diana Paton explains it. As a result, the historiography of Obeah has been primarily organized around debates as to whether Obeah was an antisocial practice used to harm others or whether it was a more complicated or benign Afro-Caribbean spiritual system, largely concerned with healing and other socially

30 As Paton has explained, “The reified idea of obeah as a unitary phenomenon, distinct from organized spiritual communities, and existing across the Anglophone Caribbean but not beyond it, owes much to colonial law-making processes.” “Obeah Acts,” 6.

31 Richardson, “Romantic Voodoo,” 173.

32 Stewart, *Three Eyes*, 44.

beneficial functions. In short, some scholars have vilified the practice of Obeah while others have celebrated or defended it. Early historians of Obeah, such as Joseph Williams, based their scholarship primarily on the writings of slaveholders or other white authors hostile to Obeah, often without acknowledging the racism and cultural bias of such sources. Williams, for example, concluded that Obeah was a form of “black magic” rooted in African witchcraft, that Obeah was “secretive and malicious,” and that the goals of Obeah practitioners were downright “evil.” Much like the British planters of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries, Williams went so far as to liken Obeah to “a form of devil worship in the Christian sense.”

Several respected historians of slavery, including Orlando Patterson and Albert Raboteau, for example, have argued that Obeah was a form of sorcery or witchcraft focused primarily on harming others.

Revisionist interpretations of Obeah, on the other hand, have argued that British observers and some historians exaggerated the malevolent or antisocial aspects of Obeah practice and consequently overlooked many of its more beneficial uses among enslaved peoples. Numerous scholars have worked hard to defend the reputation of Obeah and have depicted it as a legitimate spiritual or cultural practice and body of knowledge in the African diaspora. Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby contended that “historical scholarship has traditionally stressed its antisocial dimensions, relying too heavily, we believe, on the Eurocentric and racist perspectives of the primary sources, or secondary sources that convey

34 Williams, *Voodos and Obbeahs*, 155-56, 214.

this position.”

Although Obeah could be used to harm others, it was more often used for socially beneficial purposes, they argued, including divination, “healing and bringing good fortune, and protection from harm.”

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Although we have learned much from these historiographical debates, historians still know relatively little about how Obeah practitioners actually practiced their craft and how enslaved people reacted to the use of Obeah within their communities. The documents generated as part of the trial of Willem in 1821-22, supplemented by those produced during Hans’s trial in 1819, allow us to contribute to the growing historiography on Obeah by exploring it from the bottom-up—from the perspective of the enslaved—and focusing on the social dynamics of this complicated spiritual/cultural practice within specific communities. In this essay I attempt to use these legal records in order to see into the normally invisible social and cultural worlds of the enslaved. Central to my analysis is the conviction that Obeah was not organized solely around the desire or need to directly challenge masters or other white authorities. Instead of seeing Obeah as evidence of simply yet another form of slave resistance or cultural agency, I attempt to see how Obeah worked within enslaved communities, paying close attention to the role Obeah belief and practice played in enslaved people’s day-to-day efforts to survive and form stable communities. The following analysis sheds light on several important themes in the history of slavery.


37 Ibid., 153-154. Handler and Bilby have also offered a revisionist interpretation of the etymology of “Obeah.” They contended that although most scholars who have written on Obeah have traced its roots to various West African terms meaning “witchcraft” or “sorcery”—words that had “socially negative or malevolent meanings”—there is reason to believe that the term “Obeah” actually originated among the Igbo-, Ibibio-, or Efik-speaking peoples of the Niger delta, where “Obeah” can be linked to terms with positive or morally neutral meanings used to refer to healers or doctors. See “On the Early Use and Origin,” 89-93.
An exploration of Obeah’s function within the slave communities examined here challenges us to reexamine prevailing notions of power relations in slave societies. I argue that hierarchies of power existed between different enslaved individuals and groups within the plantation world. The power that Obeah practitioners such as Willem wielded over their contemporaries shows that we should not assume that colonial officials or the planter class had a monopoly on power and social control on the plantation. I argue that some enslaved people recognized the authority of Obeah practitioners because Obeah effectively operated as an alternative judicial and medical system within the plantation world, while others tolerated the practice of Obeah because Obeah practitioners themselves—violent, domineering men—inspired great fear among their contemporaries. I also argue that the threat posed by Obeah practitioners to whites could, at times, have little to do with their recognized connections to slave revolts and more to do with their ability to control the actions of other slaves and prompt them to harm one another.

The narrative that emerges from these trial records also challenges conventional notions of community and intrapersonal relationships among enslaved peoples. More specifically, the various ways that Obeah helped some slaves at the expense of others complicates our notion of a homogenous “slave community” in which all members had the same interests or goals and lived in harmony with one another. In Berbice and Demerara, neither a shared cultural lexicon nor the predicament of enslavement simply united slaves against their owners and other white authorities. Indeed, the practice of Obeah frequently caused or intensified social divisions among enslaved communities and destroyed individual lives. At the same time, certain Obeah practices, such as the Minje Mama dance, were remarkably violent and posed serious physical dangers to anyone who participated in them.
Moreover, Obeah practitioners routinely turned to violence in order to stifle dissent and solidify their authority within communities that did not unanimously support them. Obeah practitioners consequently inspired much fear and loathing not only among whites, but also among their enslaved contemporaries. This study therefore reminds us that conflict was an integral part of life under slavery, and that slave communities were complex social worlds.38

CHAPTER 2

“THEY COULD BRING THINGS ON THE ESTATE TO ORDER”

Toward the end of the summer of 1821, some of the enslaved people on Op Hoop van Beter began to mysteriously fall ill. This was the end of the long rainy season in Berbice—the time of the year when illness typically peaked in the swampy, riverine environments where enslaved people toiled and lived.\(^1\) And so it was not unusual that by early August, a number of slaves had died, despite receiving European medical treatment in the estate hospital. But this year the epidemic appeared to be worse than usual, and no one seemed able to put an end to it. Some people on the plantation began to suspect that the origin of the disease was an Obeah-related poisoning or curse. Eventually two of the black slave drivers, Primo and Mey, resolved to take matters into their own hands and call in an Obeah practitioner to try to help them.\(^2\) And so they turned to Willem, a man from another plantation known for his healing abilities. As one of the enslaved men on the estate explained, “in consequence of there being so many deaths on Op Hoop van Beter, the drivers had said that they should try to find out the cause of that, and that they could bring things on the estate to order.”\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Primo was the “head driver” and Mey was the “second driver.” *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 9.

\(^3\) *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 22.
The decision to turn to an Obeah practitioner was not one to be made lightly. For one thing, as everyone was aware, the criminal penalties for practicing Obeah in Berbice were harsh. Moreover, the practice of Obeah could pose its own risks. Anyone who participated in Obeah rituals knew that they frequently involved whippings, beatings, and other forms of physical violence. But on this plantation in the summer of 1821, the situation had become bad enough to warrant the risk of bringing Willem to the plantation.

The drivers’ decision to invite Willem to their plantation raises several questions. First, why did some of the people on this plantation think that an Obeah practitioner might be capable of combating disease? What sort of cultural and spiritual beliefs made them think that someone who knew how to practice Obeah would solve their problem? Second, why did they turn to Willem in particular? And finally, what sort of rituals did they expect him to perform? How, exactly, did they think Willem was going to help?

Most estates in Berbice, including Op Hoop van Beter, had so-called “hot houses” or slave hospitals, and white doctors regularly visited plantations. Yet inaccurate understandings of epidemiology and etiology meant that doctors often harmed their patients more than they helped them. As Richard B. Sheridan explained, nineteenth-century Anglo-American medical practitioners, who believed in the humoral-climatic and miasmatic theories that characterized early modern medicine, “were likely to resort to such harmful

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4 Although white doctors in Berbice and neighboring Demerara-Essequibo routinely attended to enslaved peoples, they were sometimes responsible for caring for more than 1,000 slaves each. See Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 261-62; and Juanita de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right’: Medicine and Magic in British Guiana, 1803-38,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 25, no. 1 (2004), 29.

5 As Higman has emphasized, “The ratio of slaves to doctors was of questionable significance for the survival of the slave population. It was not that the masters failed to take the provision of medical care seriously—they took it very seriously—it was simply that European medical knowledge of the period rested on weak foundation.” *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 261.
practices as bloodletting, purging, vomiting, blistering, and sweating.” These and other harmful techniques were “widely practiced in the West Indies,” where “doctors literally hurried to their graves many patients who might have survived had they remained untreated.”6 Because treatments administered by white medical practitioners were often painful, ineffective, and dangerous, enslaved people across the British Caribbean had a “widespread fear and distrust of white doctors and their medicines.”7 It is not surprising, then, that the estate hospital on Op Hoop van Beter had failed to put an end to the epidemic, or that the drivers were open to alternative solutions. Indeed, enslaved people throughout the Caribbean and American South generally relied on their own pharmacological traditions and turned to black healers when they became ill.8 In the Caribbean, black healers employed a variety of herbal or natural remedies that usually posed less danger to their patients than medicine prescribed by whites. These treatments were often more successful than those applied by white medical practitioners, as multiple contemporary observers noted.9

For Primo and Mey, there was another, more fundamental problem with Anglo-American medicine: whites conceived of disease, health, and healing in an alien way. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most Anglo-American medical practitioners thought of sickness and health in physiological terms, whereas most Africans did not separate notions of physical well-being from ideas of social harmony and spiritual health. Because they made no


7 Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves, 73.


9 Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves, 336; Higman, Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 266.
distinction between “secular” and “spiritual” causes, Africans and their enslaved descendants routinely linked ideas about health and medicine to beliefs in supernatural forces. When people became sick or died,” Vincent Brown explained, “there was always a spiritual or supernatural cause, they believed.” Illness and death, like other forms of misfortune or affliction, they would have seen as the result of witchcraft or the malicious actions of some individual, or “an imbalance in the otherwise harmonious social order on which a healthy existence depended.” Disease was not the result of physiological problems, they believed, but rather the symptom of “harmful spiritual or supernatural agency.”

When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter decided to call on Willem, they did so in large part because they needed someone who shared their philosophy of health and sickness, someone who could “put the estate to rights,” as they understood it, by devising a spiritual solution to what they saw as a spiritual—not epidemiological—crisis. Enslaved people thought European medicine was particularly ineffective when it came to curing people who had been intentionally spiritually harmed by another. The lyrics of a so-called “negro song,” as described by Jamaican planter Matthew Lewis in the early nineteenth century and attributed to a wife whose husband had been “Obeahed” by another woman, are revealing: “Doctor no do you good. When neger fall into neger hands, buckra doctor no do him good


11 Brown, The Reaper’s Garden, 61.

12 Handler, “Slave Medicine,” 60; Chireau, Black Magic, 93 (quote), 101.

13 Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves, 73.

14 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 25.
more." Afro-Caribbean slaves thought whites were powerless when it came to helping people afflicted by Obeah; Only an Obeah practitioner could help in such a case. And so the drivers turned to Willem.

Willem was one of about 100 slaves who lived on Buses Lust, a coffee plantation on the eastern side of the Berbice River. Born in Berbice in the last decade of the eighteenth century, by his twenties Willem had developed a reputation as a healer. The titles that the enslaved people used when referring to him reveal what sort of social status and reputation he enjoyed. Several witnesses testified that Willem was known as “Attetta Sara,” “the Minje Mama,” “a real Obiah man (Confou man),” and “a Confou man.” Willem also claimed that “he was God Almighty’s toboco, or child.” Although the exact meaning and etymology of some of these terms is hazy, they seem to have been used in recognition of Willem’s powers as a healer and spiritual leader. For example, “Atteta Sara” was, according to one historian, “obviously a variation of taata or tata, a word common to many African languages that meant ‘father’ or was used as a respectful form of address.” “Confou man” might have come from the Twi word “okomfo,” which meant “fetish man” or “priest,” or it might have


16 Slave registration returns for 1819 describe Willem as between twenty-one and twenty-three years-old, and also list his birthplace as Berbice. “Return of slaves attached to Plantation Buses Lust situate on the East Bank of the River Berbice,” in Slave Registers of former British Colonial Dependencies, 1812-1834, Berbice, Public Records Office, Kew (T. 71/438), 655-58.


been a variation (or misspelling) of “cumfo” (derived from the Dahomean word “Komfo”)—another name for the Minje Mamma dance in British Guiana. Some of these terms—such as “Minje Mama”—were the names of the spirits Willem became or invoked while dancing. The social and political importance of these titles is suggested by Willem’s insistence when brought before the Fiscal that he never answered to any of them. When asked if he “ever assume[d] any other name than that of Willem, or was any name given you by the negroes of that estate?,” Willem responded that he “was called Willem and Cuffey,” a common Akan/Twi day-name that had no special meaning. For enslaved people and colonial officials alike, certain titles had important connotations and linked Willem to the practice of Obeah.

Many of the people who lived on Op Hoop van Beter knew that Willem was a skilled healer from firsthand experience. Although he lived on the other side of the Berbice River, Willem visited Op Hoop van Beter regularly, perhaps regularly, to visit Johanna, his wife, before the epidemic struck. And by 1821, if not earlier, Willem had earned the trust of some


22 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 33. Cuffey (alternatively spelled Cuffy, Coffee, Cuffee, Caffy, and Quoffey) comes from Kofi, the Twi/Akan day name given to males born on a Friday, and was frequently used by many enslaved men across the British Caribbean and, less commonly, in North America. In Jamaica it was the fourth most popular name among male slaves, for example. See Trevor Burnard, “Slave Naming Patterns: Onomastics and the Taxonomy of Race in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 31, no. 3 (2001), 337; Jerome S. Handler and JoAnn Jacoby, “Slave Names and Naming in Barbados, 1650-1830,” The William and Mary Quarterly 53, no.4 (1996), 697-98; and Cheryll Ann Cody, “There Was No ‘Absalom’ on the Ball Plantations: Slave-Naming Practices in the South Carolina Low Country, 1720-1865,” The American Historical Review 92, no. 3 (1987), 581, 584.
of the people on the plantation. Cornelia, an African cook, testified that “[t]he man 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 cocoa-nut tree, and struck me on the head, and told me to go and wash myself.” Cornelia told Sterk that she had been “flogged” by Willem “with caracara sticks, [and] he made her eyes turn and she knows nothing of what passed afterwards on that occasion.” In Berbice, when enslaved people referred to a turning of the eyes or of the head, this was their way of describing spirit possession, a common feature of certain Obeah rituals. After Willem treated her, Cornelia recalled, “she found herself much better, and [believed] that this had helped to cure her,” Sterk testified.  

Cornelia was not the only person who believed that Willem had the power to cure sickness where western medicine had failed. Another witness testified that one of the enslaved men on the estate called Willem to the plantation when “he had one of his wives sick, [and] she had been two or three months with a sore on her foot, and [he] said he must find somebody to help him to get her cured.” Willem also treated sick children in the plantation hospital. “[T]he man Willem who said he was sent by God Almighty,” a man named Adolff testified, “came to the hospital…[and] Willem directed the children to be brought out, which they were by himself [Adolff] and his wife, and were washed by Willem, who took off two bits that were tied round the neck of one of them” as payment for his services.  

23 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 22, 24; Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 332.; “Return of Slaves attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter, The property of Pieter Elias Charbon of Amsterdam,” in Slave Registers of former British Colonial Dependencies, 1812-1834, Berbice, Public Records Office, Kew (T. 71/438), 121-22. A “carracarra” was a “sturdy bush rope,” and was the most commonly used instrument when plantation managers or colonial authorities flogged slaves. See Thompson, Unprofitable Servants, 39.


25 Ibid., 28. A “bit” was a small-denomination coin used in Berbice, and was equal to one guilder. Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 337, 33n.
epidemic struck the plantation in the summer of 1821, the fact that some of the people on the plantation thought Willem could help them was probably based on these earlier successes.

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Although the drivers’ decision to bring Willem to the plantation was a risky one, they probably had a good idea as to how Willem would combat the epidemic. They would have known that the sort of problem they faced called for the Minje Mama dance, a well known divination ritual. The Berbice Dutch term “minje” originally came from the Ijo word for “water” and both slaves and slaveholders used the term when referring to this ritual in the nineteenth century. Colonial officials in Berbice found this ritual so pervasive and threatening that they went to the trouble of having the legal prohibition of the ritual publicly “read and explained to the different estates on the river” in the early nineteenth century.

Also commonly known by other names, including the “Water Mama dance,” the “Mousckie dance,” the “Mousiki dance,” and the “Mackize dance,” enslaved people throughout Berbice, Demerara-Essequibo, and other Caribbean slave societies practiced this ritual. Variations of this ritual existed across the Caribbean and in some parts of West Africa, where it was an important healing practice. Enslaved people in Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad and British


27 Ibid., 42.

28 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 5, 8, 13-14, 16.

Guiana, one historian explained, “recognized a river god with healing powers named variously as the ‘Libe-Mama’, the ‘Watra-Mama’, the ‘water mamma’, the ‘rubba missis’, or ‘mamma dlo’.”

In neighboring Suriname, a “watramama cult” was a key component of the culture of enslaved peoples. Both African and creole slaves in Suriname worshipped a water goddess, who was known as “the Watramama [and] lived in the rivers, from whence she often appeared before the people, ordering them to bring her sacrifices…If such persons did not obey, she quickly would bring about their death, or the death of one or more of their family members.” In Surinam, as in Berbice, colonial officials consistently linked the watramama dance to threats posed by the spiritual practices of the enslaved population. It was “the most frequently mentioned cult and/or religious dance in both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reports,” Gert Oostindie and Alex Van Stipriaan explained, “and the only one explicitly forbidden by colonial laws because of its supposedly ‘dangerous effects on the slaves’.”

In the Guianas, the Minje Mama or Water Mamma dance was a divination and healing ritual performed when a serious social crisis threatened the community or an individual. The primary goal of this ritual was to identify the root cause of a particular problem: it aided practitioners such as Willem in making a diagnosis. “The water mamma dance,” Juanita de Barros explained, “was performed in response to misfortune or illness, either of an individual, a family or a whole community; the spirit was called upon to reveal the causes of the affliction or the identity of the person responsible for the evil. A religious

30 de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right’,” 40.
31 Oostindie and Van Stipriaan, “Slavery and Slave Culture,” 92-93.
specialist led the proceedings which were usually marked by spirit possession and dancing.”

On Op Hoop van Beter, the Minje Mama dance would allow Willem to identify the person responsible for making other people sick.

J.G. Stedman, who spent several years in Surinam in the late eighteenth century, noted the prevalence of a similar ritual among the “superstitious” enslaved people there. Stedman described a class of “Locomen, or pretended prophets, [who] find their interest in encouraging this superstition by selling them obias or amulets,” and noted that “these people have amongst them a kind of Sibyls, who deal in oracles.” They were “sage matrons,” according to Stedman, and would dance and whirl around “in the middle of an assembly, with amazing rapidity, until they them foam[ed] at the moth, and then drop[ped] down as convulsed.” At these “extremely dangerous meetings,” Stedman wrote, “whatever the prophetess orders to be done…is most sacredly performed by the surrounding multitude.”

What did the Minje Mama dance look like in practice? How did people experience it? What could people on Op Hoop van Beter have expected when they turned to Willem for help? A rare opportunity to answer these questions is provided by documents relating to another Obeah practitioner, named Hans, who was prosecuted for practicing the Minje Mama


33 In Surinam, where this ritual was “often practiced in private places,” Stedman said that it was called “winty-play, or the dance of the mermaid.” J. G. Stedman, Narrative of a Five Year’s Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (London: J. Johnson, 1806), 272-73. The Minje Mama dance as described above is also very 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 as in the case of dreams, 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.” Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 243.
dance just two years before Willem. In 1819, in the neighboring colony of Demerara, Hans was prosecuted “on charge of Obiah” after an overseer discovered that he had organized the Minje Mama dance on Plantation Demtichem. The remarkable similarities between this case and the trial of Willem for the same crime provide a means of placing the healing rituals directed toward Madalon in a broader context. As on Op Hoop van Beter, the drivers on Plantation Demtichem decided to call upon an Obeah practitioner when a series of unexplainable deaths confounded the slave community. One of the drivers succinctly explained to the overseer why he had turned to an Obeahman: “so many deaths had occurred that he had sent for a man to put every thing to rights; this man was Hans.” The driver “wished to have the bad people off the estate,” where they could do no more harm.

(Among enslaved people in the Anglophone Caribbean, the adjective “bad” was used often to refer to the use of Obeah for antisocial purposes. “Bad” could signify “evil” or “Obeah,” and to “do bad” meant to harm someone or cause him or her to fall ill “through the use of evil powers.”) The driver had called upon Hans, “who was a good negro, and with whom he was acquainted, to find out the cause of these sudden deaths.” Like the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, the drivers on Plantation Demtichem strongly suspected that someone had used Obeah to cause the recent deaths, and they turned to someone they trusted, someone whom they knew as an Obeah expert.

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34 CO 116/138/60-63, Further Papers Relating to Slaves in the West Indies; Berbice. Investigations. And, Investigation of Sundry Complaints of Negroes (hereafter cited as CO 116/138/60-63). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Trevor Burnard for generously sharing his copies of several valuable documents from this collection of Fiscals’ reports with me.

35 Ibid.

36 See Allsop, Dictionary of Caribbean English, 64.

37 CO 116/138/60-63.
Additional information about Hans, the rituals he performed, and how he understood his powers comes from a letter written by English missionary John Wray—who took a keen interest in Obeah and made an effort to learn all that he could about it while living in Berbice and Demerara—to William Wilberforce. Wray visited Hans in prison and spoke with him (in Creole) on multiple occasions after Hans was arrested. Like Willem, Hans was a respected Obeah practitioner known for healing, and he claimed that his abilities were the result of supernatural powers. Hans told Wray that “that he went to Plantation Demtichem in consequence of being sent for by January the head Driver.” “Negroes in general,” Hans claimed, “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.” He had, for example, administered ritual washings to pregnant women and children on multiple plantations (including Buses Lust, where Willem lived) in order to prevent the women from miscarrying and the children from dying.  

Unlike Willem, who learned about Obeah in Berbice, Hans was born in Africa and had learned his craft on the other side of the Atlantic. As “a Congo,” Hans had 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. On one plantation, Hans told Wray, he had used these special powers in order to identify two men as poisoners. “If I go to any house where poison is hid I can discover it from the smell,” Hans claimed.

Yet Hans acknowledged that there were limits to his abilities. Sometimes people had asked him to do things that were “above [his] art and therefore [he] could not help them.” And he insisted that he never used his powers to harm whites, even when others asked him to

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38 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819.
do so. “Numerous applications have been made to me [to use these powers against whites] but I have always rejected them. These applications,” Hans explained, “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 distinguished the rituals he practiced from the malevolent practices of other spiritual practitioners. “I am no Obiah man and do nothing that is bad,” he claimed. “All my Art consists in helping negroes that are sick.”

It was this role as a healer that Hans emphasized when he described the events on Plantation Demtichem in 1819 that led to his arrest and imprisonment. When Hans arrived on the plantation, several drivers organized a night-time gathering of many of the enslaved residents. Once a large group had gathered, January, the lead driver, took a dram of rum from a ram’s horn to commemorate Hans’s arrival. “All the people and children got sick here,” January told Hans, “and we know that in other places you have helped them and therefore we have sent for you.” Hans explained to the crowd that the children present “should point out the persons who administered poison [on] the estate.” He then killed a pullet [a young female chicken], placed the feathers in the children’s hair, and washed everyone present in order to cleanse and protect them. “Those who were sick he washed to

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40 Among some African and Afro-Caribbean populations, coolness when used in this context would have been associated with the restoration of social stability or tranquility. See Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 343-44; and Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” African Arts 7, no. 5 (1973), 41-67, 89.

41 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819. Also see da Costa, Crowns of Glory, 107-112; and de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right’,” 36.
recover them,” Wray explained, and “those who were not he washed to prevent them being so.” This cleansing “would make the Children come good,” Hans claimed.42

Although other witnesses agreed that Hans had been called in to uncover and reverse a poisoning, their accounts also emphasize his authoritarian style, the unsettling effects of the Minje Mama dance, and Hans’s frequent recourse to violence. After the ritual washing, Hans “began to sing a country song” and made everyone sing along. He also “told January that as he had come to set things right on the estate, every body, big and little, must contribute a bit.” Like most Obeah practitioners, Hans expected to be paid for his services, and told Frederick, the head carpenter: “You must collect this money, and as soon as I receive it you will see what I shall do for all of you.” Hans and the driver then left Frederick to collect the money, and returned around eleven o’clock.43

“The driver January directed that nobody was to quit the estate; every body must come to his house,” one witness testified. January told all those who had gathered “that he wished to have the bad people off the estate, and everybody must listen well.” Venus, one of the women present, provided a vivid account of what happened at this gathering:

I went there, and saw Hantz…Hantz said, he would pull off all the poison that was in the ground, which made all the people on the estate die so suddenly. A tub of water was brought by Linsey Harry; a handful of grass was put in the water by Hantz, and he stirred up the water: some wild canes were also brought by Harry. Hans sent him. Every person stooped down, and Hans washed their head. They danced first: Hans sang the dance called Walter [Water] Mamma dans. My head began to turn, as if I was mad.44

42 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819.

43 CO 116/138/60-63.

44 Ibid.
Venus was not the only person who became possessed by the spirit of the Water Mamma. Forming a circle, the crowd continued singing and dancing in a frenzy. Hans “sang a Country song & he made the Children dance on one foot clapping their hands till daylight,” according to Wray. When Hans threw water mixed with grass in one man’s face, he “immediately became as tho’ he was crazy, jumping high up from the ground and throwing himself down. Water was thrown in some of the other Negroes’ faces and they all became affected in the like manner.”

Based on descriptions provided by the slaves who participated in this ritual, the plantation attorney thought that “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.”

According to Frederick, “the negroes became as if crazy; some threw themselves in the mud – others jumped; they that were the most turbulent were flogged with the wild canes by Lindsay Harry, by order of Hans, and recovered; others more furious, and not recovering from the stripes of Lindsay Harry, Hans struck with a bamboo, and they immediately recovered.” As Venus remembered, Hans made sure that everyone was “flogged with the wild cane first; if not recovered he flogged them with a carracarra and put guinea peppers in their eyes which he had chewed. All of this was done to me but I could not recover.”

As these rituals continued, the results they produced sparked conflict—both about the identity of the poisoner and about the extent of Hans’s powers. After the Minje Mama dance had continued for some time, Venus accused Frederick of having poisoned the children and

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45 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819.

46 CO 116/138/60-63.

47 CO 116/138/60-63.
causing the recent deaths on the plantation. According to Frederick, Venus, who was “more affected than the rest,” went “into the middle of the circle being apparently crazy…throwing herself on the ground and rolling about.” She approached Frederick and “struck [him] on the breast,” and then “continued to dance and burst out into Hysterical laughter…[and] coming up to [him] said, [he] was the bad man on the estate, and that such things were never practiced by us.” Venus told Frederick “that they want[ed] to remove [him]” from the plantation, and she “[then] ran out of the circle and said ‘come, and I show you where the poison is hid,” before leading a group of people to Frederick’s house in search of the poison.  

When Venus and the others reached Frederick’s house, they “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. After “they dug but found nothing,” Venus claimed that she had made a mistake in identifying Frederick: “I did not mean to accuse the head carpenter [Frederick],” she explained, “but London.” Something had gone wrong with the divination ritual, Venus thought.  

“Let me go to Hans…to get my eyes properly washed,” she pleaded, but Frederick did not want to let her leave. “No,” he told her, “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.” At this point, Frederick decided to alert plantation authorities, afraid, perhaps, of what might happen.

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48 Hans did not follow the crowd to Frederick’s house. When the lead driver tried to help him stand, he told him: “stop, stop, let me rest my eyes are turned,” as he was apparently still possessed by the spirit of the Minje Mama. CO 116/138/60-63; Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819.

49 According to John Wray, who thought the entire affair was a conspiracy to murder Frederick, “the Negroes had frequently blamed Frederick as a poisoner” and complained about him to the previous owner of the estate. Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819. Also see de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right,’” 44.
to him now that he had been identified as a poisoner. As the attorney on the plantation recalled, Frederick “came crying to the overseer, Mr. Boaz, to complain that the negroes were breaking open his house, and digging up the ground, accusing him of being a poisoner.” The overseer quickly broke up the proceedings and placed the drivers in the stocks, and “reported the circumstance to the burgher officer and the Fiscal.” Meanwhile, Venus and the others had gone to Hans and told him what had happened, at which point Hans left the plantation before the overseer could capture him.  

The following day, Hans returned to vindicate his claim that Frederick was the poisoner. He knew there was some “bad thing” in Frederick’s house “from the smell he had of it.” But, he believed that he could only discover it with the help of a child, and it had to be “a girl who had lost her mother” or a twin. According to Venus, “Hans said he would make a little child find where the pot of obiah was hid.” Hans ordered two men to take Gabriel, a girl about nine or ten years old, from her home and bring her to Frederick’s house. Hans “took a piece of salemporis [a type of cloth], and put it over [Gabriel’s] head” in order to blindfold her, and then “he told [her] that if [she] saw anything” she would die. They then carried her to Frederick’s, where they demanded that Frederick’s wife allow them to enter. When she relented, they gave the young girl a pot to hold and ordered her to sit on a small bench next to a hole that Hans had ordered two others to dig in the dirt floor. “He then made the people examine the Pot to see if there was any thing in it, but Water,” and they

50 CO 116/138/60-63.
51 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819.
52 “Salemporis” or “salempore” was a type of dyed cotton cloth commonly exported from India to the West Indies. Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 339, n35.
53 CO 116/138/60-63.
all agreed that there was not. Later, when Hans ordered one of the men gathered “to take the child up, the salemporis still hanging over her head and shoulders, and carry her to the hole,” and then removed the blindfold, “the pot appeared to contain a ram’s horn, some fluid, and the bones of some animal.” According to John Wray, the pot contained a sheep’s horn, “the mouth of which was tied over with a cloth.” Hans ordered one of the men to take the horn out and cut it open, and when he did they discovered that the horn contained “blood, Negro hair, shavings of nails, the head of a snake, or some such thing & other things so that was quite full.” Hans told those present that “the stuff in the Horn was the bad thing which had destroyed the children, but it would do so no longer.”

However convincing this evidence may have been, it was not sufficient to protect Hans from arrest. Several days later, the plantation overseer took Hans into custody, “from the public road,” with the help of the plantation’s stable boy. He was brought to trial and charged with practicing Obeah, and though the Fiscal pushed for a death sentence as provided under colonial law, the Court of Criminal Justice spared Hans’s life. Yet his sentence was still severe: he was to be whipped under the gallows, branded, imprisoned for a year, stand in the pillory four times, and work for the rest of his life—in chains—“for the benefit of the colony.” Those who had participated in the Minje Mama or otherwise assisted Hans, including January—who was also demoted from his special status as head driver—

54 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819.

55 CO 116/138/60-63.

56 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct 29, 1819. Also see de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right’,” 35.

57 When the overseer and William located Hans, the overseer ordered William to seize him, but William “declared he was afraid to do so,” perhaps because he feared Hans’s powers as an Obeah practitioner. CO 116/138/60-63.
were sentenced to be whipped. And, according to Wray, Venus was sentenced to work in chains for a year and “was stripped naked when she was flogged.”

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This case reveals the basic features of the Minje Mama dance as practiced in early nineteenth-century British Guiana. Hans’s experience on Plantation Demtichem also provides an opportunity to see what enslaved people could expect to happen when they called upon an Obeah practitioner to combat disease or prevent death. Though Hans was clearly the utmost authority, the drivers played a central role throughout this process. They were the ones who called Hans, who organized the estate’s slaves when Hans went to the plantation, and saw that Hans’s orders were carried out. As this case shows, the first step was diagnosing the problem and identifying the guilty party (in this case, the person responsible for causing others to become sick or die). An effective way to do so was by conducting the Minje Mama dance, a collective ritual that had to be performed at night, away from the gaze of white plantation authorities, “with the greatest secrecy in the silent hours of the night.”

This was also a violent ritual, one that enslaved people endured as one might a painful surgical procedure rather than something to be celebrated. For the slaves on Plantation Demtichem in late 1819, the pain was worth it because the divination ritual had been successful: Venus identified Frederick as a poisoner after Hans organized the dance and called upon the spirit of the Minje Mama. After identifying the cause of the problem, the next step was neutralizing the power of whatever had threatened the enslaved community.

58 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819. Also see da Costa, Crowns of Glory, 111. As late as 1829—ten years after January was convicted of having assisted Hans—he remained angry that he had been punished and demoted as driver, according to the overseer’s complaints. Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 287

For Hans, that meant finding and removing the poison they suspected Frederick of using to harm his contemporaries. Once he had located and then removed or neutralized the poison—the “pot of obiah”—Hans’s job was complete. As far as Hans and the drivers were concerned, the Minje Mama dance had succeeded in helping them “put every thing to rights” on the estate.

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The British were wrong in assuming that Obeah rituals were always directed against slaveholders or other white people. Although slaveholders were right to think that Obeah practitioners held great sway among their contemporaries, they did not always use their influence to stir up rebellion. Indeed, enslaved people relied on Obeah rituals such as the Minje Mama dance to address problems or conflicts within their communities that were not necessarily associated with whites. Rituals such as the Minje Mama dance were part of enslaved people’s struggle to restore or promote physical and spiritual health in an environment where disease and death were daily realities and malevolent spiritual powers abounded. The use of Obeah as a divination and healing practice reminds us that the spiritual practices of enslaved people—while no doubt important in revolts and other means of resistance—were also of critical importance in the day-to-day conflicts that existed between slaves and the many problems they faced.

Although some enslaved people saw Obeah practitioners such as Hans and Willem as powerful healers, the decision to turn to them was fraught with great risk. Bringing an Obeah practitioner—even one whom was known and trusted—to one’s plantation was dangerous. If plantation authorities realized an Obeah practitioner had been called to the plantation, everyone involved could be severely punished, perhaps even killed. Equally important,
Obeah practitioners themselves could injure the very people they sought to cure or protect—not to mention anyone who interfered with the rituals they conducted. Certain Obeah rituals, such as the Minje Mama dance, were painful for those who participated in them, and there was always the risk that one might be identified as the guilty party, as happened to Frederick. The spiritual efforts of Obeah practitioners might have been “largely directed toward what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals,” as some scholars have argued, but the practice of Obeah could also have disastrous consequences for certain individuals. 60

Obeah practitioners were capable of destroying individual lives in the process of their attempts to heal entire communities. When the slave drivers on Op Hoop van Beter chose to call Willem to the plantation, they were therefore taking a serious, if calculated, risk.

CHAPTER 3

“THE BAD WOMAN”

One Sunday afternoon in early August, 1821, after finishing his day’s work at a nearby plantation, Willem slipped into a “small corial” (canoe) and paddled across the Berbice River to Op Hoop van Beter.¹ According to Barron, one of the men who lived on the plantation, Willem “came over with several of his Mattees [workmates or friends], and at sun-set they went away again.”² Willem’s first order of business was finding Primo. “When this man, Willem of Buses Lust, first came upon the estate,” Barron testified, “he inquired for the [head] driver’s [Primo’s] house, where he remained till the evening.”³ Willem and Primo no doubt discussed the recent bout of illnesses on the plantation and planned a strategy for identifying the cause of the epidemic.

¹ Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 14. “Corial” was the creole term used for dugout canoes, the primary means of transportation throughout Berbice. See Allsopp, Dictionary of Caribbean English, 169; and Mary Noel Menezes, ed., The Amerindians in Guyana, 1803-73: A Documentary History, (London: Frank Cass, 1979), 296. Unlike most other slave societies in the Caribbean, plantations in British Guiana were almost exclusively located along the Atlantic coastline or bordering the many interior rivers and creeks of the colony, and were linked to one another by an elaborate hydrologic maze of canals (kokers), trenches, and rivers. Watercraft was therefore essential for those who wished to travel from one plantation to another. See Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves,” 26-27.

² Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 16. According to Lean, although the term “mattee” in Berbice “very often corresponded to the term ‘workmate’ in modern usage, it was also used in the broader context of friendship, and may have even been substituted...for closer fictive kin relationships.” See “The Secret Lives of Slaves,” 213. Allsopp similarly defined “matee” as “[a] close friend; [by extension] another person of the same race, or nation.” Dictionary of Caribbean English, 376.

³ Primo claimed that “as driver, I could not allow him to come to my house;” but he did admit that he knew Willem. Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 21, 30.
The majority of the Fiscal’s early interrogations were aimed at finding out what Willem did after arriving on the plantation. The Fiscal repeatedly asked the slaves he interrogated if there had been “any assemblage of the gang of negroes” on the estate? Did “any dance take place”? And, “if so, who was the instigator or proposer of this dance?” What, he wanted to know, was “the name of the dance; the manner it was performed; the purpose of this dance, and at whose house?” Evidently, he was primarily concerned about clandestine nighttime gatherings of slaves—presumably out of fear that such meetings might lead to revolts.

Several witnesses testified that Willem had indeed performed the Minje Mama dance that Sunday night. “Willem of Buses Lust,” Barron testified, “was the person who brought this bad business on the estate,” meaning that Willem was the one who had organized the Obeah rituals. Several witnesses corroborated Barron’s account and provided more details. The testimony of Munro, Madalon’s husband, is particularly revealing. Like Willem, Munro did not live on Op Hoop van Beter, but he frequently went there to visit his wife and knew many of the other slaves who lived there. (In Berbice, it was not uncommon for enslaved people to take to the waterways and travel between different plantations, often to visit family members or friends.) Munro was eager to tell the Court about Willem’s visit to Op Hoop van Beter and role in Madalon’s murder, no doubt because he wanted to see Madalon

4 Ibid., 14, 16-17.
5 Ibid., 16-17, 20.
6 Munro lived on a plantation called Vrouw Johanna. Ibid., 23.
7 As Gill has noted, the many rivers and creeks of Berbice “did not impede the movement of the enslaved across the colony. This is not surprising as many of the Africans [enslaved there] were taken from areas in Africa where water transportation was quite common.” Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 367
avenged. Munro told the Fiscal that he went to visit Madalon the same Sunday that Willem arrived on the plantation, and that he spent the night with Madalon, unaware that she would soon be blamed for the epidemic. Munro testified that “the Minje Mama dance was danced on Op Hoop van Beter on the Sunday evening…[and that] he saw it.” “The man Cuffey, of Buses Lust was the Minje Mama, and superintended the dance; if he was not there,” Munro claimed, “it could not be done.”

Kees, the logie driver on Op Hoop van Beter, similarly told the Fiscal that Willem as “a Confou man,” and that he “made the people dance the Makisi dance” on Sunday night.

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On Op Hoop van Beter, the Minje Mama dance was supposed to serve a similar function as it had on Plantation Demtichem two years earlier. The goal was the same: to find out who was making people sick and then deal with that person accordingly. According to multiple witnesses, Willem returned to the plantation on Monday—the day after he performed the Minje Mama dance—and publicly denounced Madalon as the cause of the epidemic. Kees testified that he “heard Willem tell Madalon that she was the bad woman who caused so many strong healthy people on the estate to become sick.”

The Minje Mama dance, it seemed, was going according to plan.

The identification of Madalon as the cause of the epidemic raises several questions that go to the heart of Obeah theory and practice. First, why would Willem and others have

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8 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 23.


10 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 29, 32.
been willing to hold a particular person responsible for what seemed to be an epidemic
disease? Second, what exactly did Willem and the others who denounced Madalon believe
that she had done to cause the epidemic? And finally, why did others find this explanation
plausible?

Africans and their descendants in the Americas frequently blamed witchcraft, Obeah,
or conjuring when inexplicable sickness, death or other misfortune struck.¹¹ In pre-colonial
Kongo, for example, “if anyone fell sick or died, the community invariably accused someone
of harming him through witchcraft.”¹² In the British Caribbean, disease, death or “virtually
any untoward event” was likely to cause accusations of witchcraft or at least arouse suspicion
of wrongdoing among enslaved people.¹³ Even slaveholders realized that slaves often
suspected someone of using Obeah when unexplained sickness or death occurred. According
to Bryan Edwards, a Jamaican planter and legislator in the late eighteenth century, “when, at
any time, sudden or untimely death overtakes any of their companions…[slaves] never fail to
impute it to the malicious contrivances and diabolical arts of some practitioner in Obeah.”¹⁴

¹¹ 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 Bellgrade-
Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 135-136; Robert Dirks, The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and
Its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Slave Plantations (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987),
155; John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion (London: Heinemann, 1975), 117; Raboteau, Slave Religion,
276; James H. Sweet, Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World,
1441-1770 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 139.

¹² Jason R. Young, Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the
Era of Slavery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 117. Also see John K. Thornton,
“Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500-1700,” in Central Africans and
Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora, ed. by Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge
University Press, 2002), 81; and Thornton, Africa and Africans, 241-43.

¹³ Dirks, Black Saturnalia, 155.

¹⁴ Bryan Edwards, History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies (London: 1798),
106.
Missionary John Wray similarly noted that enslaved people in Berbice and Demerara frequently attributed sickness and death to Obeah practitioners.\textsuperscript{15}

Willem and others probably thought Madalon was a poisioner, or, more likely, an Obeah practitioner who used her powers for evil. The language that Willem used when denouncing her reveals that he believed her to have used Obeah to make other people sick and die: “I will drive the bad story out of your head,” Willem told Madalon as he beat her, in an effort to force the Obeah out of her, as one historian describes it.\textsuperscript{16} Where Hans had attributed the sickness on Plantation Demtichem to a dangerous physical object—the poison fetish that was supposedly buried near or in Frederick’s house—Willem believed that Madalon herself was possessed by some sort of evil spirit. The only way to combat the epidemic, he believed, was to force this spirit out of her body, in a sort of exorcism.

It would have seemed plausible to most enslaved people that Madalon was an Obeah practitioner. Although some contemporary British observers believed that Obeah practitioners were usually or exclusively men, abundant evidence shows that women across the Caribbean practiced Obeah, too.\textsuperscript{17} One witness described Madalon as “rather advanced in years, but otherwise a healthy woman,” and slave registration returns reveal that she was about forty years old in the summer of 1821.\textsuperscript{18} In a world where the average life span was


\textsuperscript{16} Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 25, 29; de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right,’” 26.

\textsuperscript{17} Handler “Slave Medicine,” 62n14; Patterson, Sociology of Slavery, 189; Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 133.

\textsuperscript{18} Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 21. In 1819, Madalon was thirty-seven years-old. “Return of Slaves attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” 121-22.
less than twenty-three years, Madalon’s age was indeed noteworthy. Slave registration returns listed Madalon’s birthplace as “Africa,” and described her as having “African marks on the breast.” She was old enough to have been brought directly from Africa, before the British stopped participating in the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, and one enslaved witness described her as “a Congo woman,” so she was probably born either in the Kingdom of Kongo or elsewhere in West Central Africa.

Enslaved people across the British Caribbean routinely took action against anyone they suspected of using Obeah for antisocial purposes. In 1816, for example, when the enslaved residents of Plantation Demtichem (the plantation Hans visited in 1819) became suspicious that a man named Tobias had been practicing Obeah, they denounced him to the overseer and pleaded with the manager to punish him severely. As the manager saw it, Tobias was a “very bad character, and disliked by all the other negroes on the estate,” probably because they thought he intended to use Obeah against them or had already done so. The manager took these fears seriously, and had Tobias put in the stocks for “near two

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19 The average life span for enslaved people in Berbice between 1820-1832 was less than twenty-three years, and slaveholders frequently thought of slaves more than forty years-old as “old.” See Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves, 196; George Roberts, “A Life Table for a West Indian Slave Population,” Population Studies 5 (1952): 238-43; and Higman, Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 18.

20 “Return of Slaves attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” 121-22; Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 14. As Philip D. Curtin has shown, the term “Congo” came to be used when referring to “any Bantu-speaking people from western Central Africa,” not just people brought from the Kingdom of Kongo. The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 188. According to Allsopp, the term “Congo” was also eventually used by some enslaved people in the Caribbean as a derogatory term for someone “who is black, whose standard of living is of the lowest, speech uneducated and language rough, and who is also considered basically stupid and ignorant.” The term “Congo” became an insult due to the fact that African captives from West Central Africa generally went to the Caribbean later than West Africans. Dictionary of Caribbean English, 167.
months, with an allowance of four plantains and a bottle of water per day,” after which he was “sold at public vendue, and not allowed to return to the plantation.”21

Similar conflicts between an Obeah practitioner and other slaves developed on a Jamaican plantation in the same time period. Between 1816-1818, planter Matthew Lewis frequently complained of his problems with Adam, an enslaved man “who has been long and strongly suspected of having connections with Obeah men” and was “a reputed Obeah-man” himself. Because Adam had used Obeah to harm his contemporaries, Lewis explained, he was seen as “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 on the estate] of being an Obeah-man,” and was also “strongly suspected of having poisoned more than twelve negroes” on the plantation where he lived. He had also “threatened the lives of many of the best negroes.” Because they lived in near-constant fear of Adam, in 1818 several “principal negroes” (perhaps the drivers) asked Lewis to remove him from the plantation, “as their lives were not safe while breathing the same air with Adam.”22

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When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter began to suspect that an Obeah practitioner was responsible for the epidemic that had already claimed many lives, they took the threat very seriously. As they saw it, they had had two tasks ahead of them. The first was to find out exactly who the “bad” person was. This they would accomplish by bringing Willem—one capable of organizing an effective divination and diagnostic ritual—to the


22 When Lewis searched Adam’s home and found “a considerable quantity of materials for the practice of Obeah,” he had him “immediately committed to the gaol,” then brought him to the slave court where he was convicted of practicing Obeah and given a sentence of transportation after a three-hour trial. Journal of a West India Proprietor, 137, 147, 237, 350-354.
plantation. And, soon after Willem arrived, it became clear that the Minje Mama dance had been a success, just as when Hans organized it two years earlier. Thanks to this ritual, Willem identified Madalon as the cause of the epidemic. Up to this point, everything was going according to plan. But there was still much work to be done. Now that they had identified the Madalon as the “bad woman,” Willem and the drivers had to find some way getting rid of her or of neutralizing her powers to prevent further disease and death. The diagnosis complete, it was now time to begin the healing process.
CHAPTER 4

“SETTING THE ESTATE TO RIGHTS”

Convinced that he had found the person responsible for the epidemic, Willem turned his energies toward cleansing Madalon and restoring the spiritual health of the enslaved community. On two consecutive nights, the drivers organized clandestine gatherings at which Willem presided over ritual dances that included the repeated beating of Madalon. Although Willem intended this to be a healing process, the form it took was severe violence. In addition to brutally beating Madalon, Willem repeatedly turned to physical violence and threats when anyone on the plantation challenged his authority or tried to interfere with these rituals. He also forced others to assault Madalon, and beat them if they refused. Violence thus played a central role both in the performance of these rituals themselves and in Willem’s efforts to maintain his authority. Although some people thought this violence was justifiable and effective, others stood up to Willem, particularly when they thought that things were getting out of hand and that Madalon might be killed. The controversial nature of these Obeah rituals, and Willem’s frequent recourse to violence and intimidation, reveal that Obeah occupied an ambivalent position within this slave society.

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On Monday evening Willem returned to Op Hoop van Beter. “After the people had thrown their grass”—their final task for the day—“and retired to the negro-houses,” one
witness explained, Willem called several people together, including Madalon and the drivers. In front of the group, another man recalled, “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.”

Willem and the drivers were careful to ensure that this violent process went unnoticed by whites. Yet at some point the plantation manager heard noises coming from the slaves’ quarters—Madalon’s cries for help, perhaps—and sent an overseer to investigate. But when the overseer approached, one witness testified, “the first person [he] met was Willem, who is a real Obiah man (Confou man), who took up some ashes from the fire and strewed them across the road, which prevented any body [from] seeing farther on.” Willem was not the only person who did not want the overseer to know what was happening to Madalon. According to the same witness, when the overseer approached, he “was met by the driver Primo, who on being questioned as to what was the occasion of the noise, said that it was nothing but the people rejoicing in consequence of having finished weeding the last of the heavy grass.” Since Primo had asked Willem to come to the plantation and, as head driver, was responsible for keeping order among the estate’s slaves, he knew that if the overseer found out what was happening he would be held accountable, and thus he wanted to avoid detection as much as Willem did.

At the same time, it is possible that the plantation manager knew and approved of what was going on. According to one of the enslaved men who lived on the plantation, “the

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1 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 15.
2 Ibid., 25. Although Primo never admitted his role in Madalon’s torture and murder, he did admit that one evening he told the overseer “that the people were rejoicing for having got through it [the weeding of the grass], [and that] was the cause of the noise he came to inquire about.” Ibid., 34.
manager himself knew” that Willem had been asked to come to the plantation “and said he must find some person capable of finding out who it was that was the cause of the death of so many Creoles on the estates.” For whatever reason, no whites interfered with these rituals.

When Willem and his accomplices finished beating Madalon for the night, they left her tied up by the wrists, in front of the slaves’ quarters. Too weak or too frightened to free herself, she would have spent the night in this position had it not been for Frederic, who untied her, covered her with a blanket, and took her to his house to rest and recover and, quite possibly, to protect her from Willem. However, Willem found out what Frederick had done and threatened to flog him for challenging his authority. Willem’s message was clear: if you interfere with this process, you are going to get hurt. This was not the first time that Willem relied on the threat of violence to assert his authority, and it would not be the last.

The following morning, Madalon awoke early and went into the fields as usual, her injuries still fresh from the night before. “Madalon went to her work,” Frederic explained, “but was unable to get through her row [her daily task], which was completed for her by the negro Quashee, a temporary driver.” “When she went to her work,” another witness testified, “the driver asked her why she did not go to the hospital, seeing she was full of itch [wounds] on her backside and a boil on her thigh,” not to mention “some blood on her clothes.” Despite the severity of her injuries, Madalon refused to seek medical treatment or leave the fields, and explained that “she preferred going to her work to going to the hospital,

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3 Ibid., 19.


5 Ibid., 15. Enslaved people in Berbice used the term “row” to refer to their daily task. See Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 147n41.
as there she got nothing but barley to eat.” Her refusal to go to the estate hospital, however, probably had little to do with food. Instead, Madalon might have avoided the hospital because she feared that going there would not protect her from Willem, someone known to treat sick slaves confined there. Yet, like other slaves, Madalon had no shortage of reasons for staying away from such hospitals. Enslaved peoples’ aversion to confinement in slave hospitals—where they were routinely placed in the stocks and subjected to painful, sometimes fatal medical procedures—is well-documented. Perhaps Madalon, like others, was simply “repelled by the stench and foul-tasting medicines and feared to go to a place where other slaves had died,” a place where she would have also been separated from her friends and family, the only people likely to try and protect her from further abuse.

According to the trial record, Madalon made no effort to condemn Willem’s actions or involve whites in her plight. Perhaps she thought that her ordeal was over, and that speaking up would only further provoke Willem, a man quick to resort to violence when angered. Or maybe Madalon was afraid that if she went to the manager and told him what was happening he might side with Willem and the others, and punish her for using Obeah against other slaves. In any case, Willem was gone most of the day, so there were ample opportunities for Madalon—or those who had witnessed her beating—to tell the plantation manager what had happened without Willem’s interference. But no one came forward.

In order to guarantee the cooperation of those who had helped him beat Madalon or knew what had happened to her, Willem had “administered to the other negroes a drink,

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6 *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 17; John Wray letter, Feb. 6, 1822.

7 As da Costa explained, most plantation hospitals in the neighboring colony of Demerara “looked more like prisons than hospitals, since it was there that slaves were usually locked up in stocks.” *Crowns of Glory*, 55.

8 Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 272.
declaring that it would be the death of any one of them who should reveal what had taken
place,” Frederic recalled. Enslaved people throughout the Caribbean, and their West
African contemporaries, regularly participated in similar loyalty oath-taking ceremonies,
which they took very seriously. Perhaps no one said anything to the manager on Op Hoop van
Beter because they feared the consequences of breaking their vow of silence.

Whether or not they believed in Obeah or feared Willem’s supernatural powers, the
people on Op Hoop van Beter had good reason to be afraid of his physical violence. Indeed,
many of the people on the estate were justifiably terrified of what Willem might do to those
who dared disobey him. When the Fiscal asked Kees, for example, why he did not go to the
plantation manager, he explained that “he was too much afraid of Willem, from the severe
punishments he inflicted upon them,” and removed his clothing in order to show “the scars,
or remains of flogging he had received from Willem.” Whatever the reason, the fact that no
one—Madalon included—went to the manager or other white authorities after participating
in or witnessing these extremely violent rituals raises several important questions. Why were
Obeah practitioners like Willem such powerful, intimidating figures within this society?
How did they establish and maintain their authority?

Understanding why so few people objected to the violent nature of the rituals directed
at Madalon requires us to acknowledge the important role that violence played in some

9 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 15.

Indies,” in Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery, ed. Stephan Palmie (Knoxville: University of Knoxville
Press, 1995), 35; Gaspar, Bondmen and Rebels, 246-47; Stewart, Three Eyes for the Journey, 43.

11 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 29.
Obeah healing rituals. Indeed, this was not the first time that the people who lived on Op Hoop van Beter had witnessed violence used to punish or purify someone suspected of using Obeah to harm others. Court records reveal that Willem had performed the Minje Mama dance and other healing rituals on Op Hoop van Beter on earlier occasions, and many enslaved people thought this violence was effective.

Vigilant, an enslaved man from a nearby plantation, told the Fiscal that the Minje Mama dance was frequently “performed at plantation Op Hoop van Beter, on Sundays.” Vigilant said 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, or Sara, appeared to be the principal, and promoter of the dancing.”

It is revealing that Vigilant did not distinguish between the practice of Obeah and physical violence, which suggests that ritual flogging or beating was an integral, and necessary, part of the Minje Mama dance. Other witnesses corroborated Vigilant’s account and identified the man beaten as David, an enslaved man who, according to an 1817 slave registration return, suffered from yaws, a disease that white doctors refused to treat because it was highly contagious. Although David refused to talk to the Fiscal about this event, he initially confessed to Sterk that he had been “flogged by the orders of the negro Willem, called Attetta Sara,” because Willem “blamed him as being one of the Obii people on the estate.” According to Sterk, “after

12 Although he did not personally know David, Vigilant later identified him “as the man who in his presence had been punished on plantation Op Hoop van Beter, by order of the negro Willem.” Ibid., 14, 21.

13 An 1817 slave registration return listed David as a thirty six year old African-born slave “with yaws.” “Return of Slaves attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” 119-120. According to Sheridan, black healers attended to slaves suffering with yaws because whites “were repulsed by yaws patients, whose bodies were often covered with disgusting ulcerous eruptions.” Doctors and Slaves, 83. In Berbice, slaves with yaws were often isolated from healthy slaves in a special “yaws house,” and those who recovered sometimes took between six months and a year to do so. Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 232.
[David] was flogged he was ordered to give payment to the said negro Willem for having flogged the Obeah work out of his head.”

The fact that Willem expected David to pay him suggests that enslaved people did not see this ritual flogging as some form of torture or “punishment,” as the Fiscal and other whites interpreted it, but rather as a beneficial service that helped David get better. Although some Obeah healing rituals were painful and dangerous, enslaved people did not think they were senseless or meant to cause harm. The strategies employed by Willem when he tried to purify Madalon, violent as they were, would have therefore seemed appropriate and effective to some of the people on Op Hoop van Beter.

Violence had also played a central role in Hans’s efforts to identify the poisoner or Obeah person on Plantation Demtichem two years earlier, which suggests that the violent nature of Willem’s actions was typical of some Obeah practitioners in British Guiana. At the very least, the testimony gathered as part of Hans’s trial makes it clear that Willem was not the only Obeah practitioner who used violence and threats as part of his healing efforts. Throughout the Minje Mama dance, Hans made sure that everyone present was beaten and he rubbed “guinea pepper” in their eyes. Several witnesses, moreover, testified that because of this violence they were able to “recover.” The fact that multiple persons—all of whom endured great pain—did not describe this violence as unusual or make any effort to stop Hans but instead described this ritual in terms of an effective healing or diagnostic strategy

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14 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 22, 29.

15 CO 116/138/60-63.
suggests that for many enslaved people in Demerara and Berbice, ritual floggings and the pain they caused were a necessary evil.\textsuperscript{16}

At the same time, we should not overlook the fact that Willem and Hans did face opposition or the fact that they and maintained their authority, in part, through physical force and threats of violence. If violence was useful in their healing practices, it was also an essential means of maintaining their power. Hans, for example, threatened to “flog” Gabriel, the young girl he employed to help locate the poison in Frederick’s house, if she began to cry, and told her that she “should die” if she “saw any thing” when he placed a blindfold over her eyes. Other people’s fear of Hans is suggested by the fact that when, after having apprehended Hans, the plantation attorney ordered “one of the carpenters and head cooper to undress him; they hesitated,” apparently afraid to approach or touch him.\textsuperscript{17} Willem was also quick to threaten or attack others, and consequently inspired great fear. In addition to his threat to flog Frederick, as mentioned earlier, the trial record reveals that Willem flogged one of the drivers for failing to show up when Willem first organized the Minje Mama dance. Willem “beat me the following morning for not being present at the dance,” the driver told the Fiscal.\textsuperscript{18} And, when the same driver admitted that he helped beat Madalon the following night, he claimed that he only did so 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.”\textsuperscript{19} If Willem ran into

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} As de Barros explains, some enslaved people tolerated this violence because it “was part of the attempt to uncover the ‘guilty’ person, a necessary step in the divination ritual.” “‘Setting Things Right’,” 36.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} CO 116/138/60-63.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 29.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 43-44.}
little opposition because some people thought he could help combat the epidemic or that the
violence of these rituals was unusual, it is also true that others did not stand up to him for a
different reason: they were terrified of him.\(^{20}\)

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On Tuesday, the day after Willem publicly identified Madalon as “the bad woman,”
Willem returned to the plantation sometime during the night. Once again, he began by
having Madalon flogged in front of the slaves’ quarters, where she was tied up in front of the
lead driver’s door. After being “punished” for an unknown length of time by slaves armed
with tree branches and other improvised weapons, one witness testified, Madalon
“acknowledged she had been guilty of the death of several persons.”\(^{21}\) This was the moment
Willem and the others had been waiting for. When Madalon confessed, she confirmed their
suspicions: she really was the “bad woman.”

And yet, admitting guilt did not bring and end to her ordeal. A confession alone was
not enough. The physical abuse Willem and the others inflicted on Madalon, unlike the
torture of people accused of witchcraft in European or North American trials, was not
designed merely to elicit a confession. It was intended to purify her, to take away her ability
to harm others through the use of spiritual power. And so Willem and the others continued to
beat her, so badly, in fact, “that she fainted from the excess of punishment,” as one witness
described it. Yet even when Madalon lay unconscious, Willem was unwilling to let up.
When she fainted, Willem “said it was only a sham,” and ordered that the whipping continue.

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\(^{20}\) de Barros similarly argued that if Willem’s authority rested on his ability to heal, “it may have also been
based on the fear he inspired.” “‘Setting Things Right’,” 42.

\(^{21}\) Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 20.
He then told others to take her to a mango tree where she was “tied up by the hands,” one man recalled, “so that her toes could just barely reach the ground.”22 Frederic, who was hiding “in one of the negro-houses” because of Willem’s threat to flog him the previous night, described the scene: “Madalon [was] taken and tied up by the wrists to a mangoe tree, by the negroes Sango Kees, (a driver) and Adolff; in that situation she was flogged by order of the before-named negro Willem of Buses Lust, with sticks of the babba-tree;…the persons who surrounded and punished her were too numerous for [me] to distinguish the particular individuals who were striking her,” he testified.23

Yet not everyone took part in these rituals, according to trial testimony. Of the more than one hundred and fifty slaves who lived on this plantation, only a dozen or so appear in the trial record as actual participants in Madalon’s beating or the Minje Mama dance.24 One man testified, for example, that “Willem called him to go help flog the woman, but he did not go; he saw the woman flogged, but did not help.”25 For whatever reason, some people on the estate chose not to involve themselves. This appears to have also been the case two years earlier when Hans went to Plantation Demtichem—an estate with more than three hundred enslaved residents—and only a handful of people actively participated in the Minje Mama dance.26 Maybe some of the people on these plantations did not believe in the efficacy of the Minje Mama dance, or thought that Hans or Willem did not have the powers that they

22 Ibid., 20.

23 Ibid., 15.

24 A slave registration return for 1819 lists a total of 172 slaves attached to Op Hoop van Beter. “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” 119-20.

25 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 27.

boasted of. But on Op Hoop van Beter, this lack of universal support created little problem for Willem; he did not need everyone on the plantation or even the majority of them to actively support him or even believe in Obeah. He only needed the drivers—recognized authorities on the plantation—and a handful of others to help him beat Madalon and keep others from interfering. The only thing that everyone else had to do was keep quiet about what they saw or knew was taking place. Yet a small number of people did challenge Willem, or only assisted him when he forced them to do so, as evidenced by Frederic’s attempt to protect Madalon the first evening she was tortured and Kees’s insistence that he whipped Madalon only after Willem had flogged him for being absent the first night.

The power struggles that developed when some individuals refused to assist Willem or tried to help Madalon reveal the sorts of social conflicts that existed among enslaved people but rarely appear in the written sources historians rely on. Some people, because they believed her to have sickened or killed several people, including their family members or friends, felt little sympathy for Madalon. As Kees told Madalon the second night she was beaten: “Come along, so long you have been the death of several people, I can’t help you.”27 Yet not everyone thought Madalon deserved the violence Willem and those who helped him inflicted on her. But anyone who provoked Willem risked getting a dose of his violence themselves. On the second night, for example, when a few slaves pleaded with Willem to free Madalon, “Willem prevented the People from interfering, and beat them if they attempted to speak,” one man testified.28 And even those who tried to stop Willem did not tell the manager or other whites what was going on. As divided as this enslaved community

27 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 20 [ital. in original]

28 Ibid., 25.
was over Madalon’s fate, the affair remained a secret because Willem was able to
successfully intimidate anyone who doubted his powers or tried to protect Madalon.

Willem bound Madalon’s hands and ordered Kees to whip her and “[run] up and
down the path with her, Willem saying, that as she run along the bad thing would come out
of her head.” Kees and another man continued to “beat her as they dragged her along with
fire-sticks and other weapons.” Willem then approached Madalon and “struck her with a
shovel across the back,” one witness testified, “which made her fall down, and exclaim she
was dying.”

Madalon pleaded with Willem to stop. She cried out: “You are killing me.” “No,” he
told her, “we are not killing you, but I will drive the bad story out of your head.” This was a
healing ritual, as he saw it—there was no cause for concern. Although Madalon feared that
she would not survive this second night of torture, Willem claimed that it was impossible for
her to die while under his control. Frederic testified that when Madalon appeared to be on
the verge of losing consciousness, Willem “continued to flog her, and said that he was God
Almighty’s toboco, or child, and should make her get up again.” After all, he was a powerful
Obeah practitioner who could bring Madalon back to life if she died before the healing
process was complete.

Yet Madalon was not the only one worried that things had gotten dangerously out of
control. Several persons tried to put an end to the affair, either by approaching the drivers on
behalf of Madalon or by appealing to Willem directly. “When the woman Madalon was

29 Ibid., 25, 29.
30 Ibid., 15.
being flogged,” Barron testified, “[I] spoke to the driver Primo that it was going too far, when the driver desired him to hold his tongue.”\(^{32}\) But even Primo—the estate’s highest-ranking slave—was unable to stop Willem, for as soon as he tried, Willem struck him with a whip.\(^{33}\) Frederic, too, tried to stop Willem, jeopardizing his own safety yet again. But Willem quickly drove him away and “said nothing could happen to the woman.”\(^{34}\)

After beating her to the point of unconsciousness, Willem ordered Madalon to be tied to a sand-koker tree, and left there for the night.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{33}\) Multiple witnesses told the Fiscal that Willem flogged Primo, and said 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.” When the Fiscal ordered Primo to take off his jacket, “his shoulder exhibited the mark of a stroke of a whip.” Ibid., 35.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 26, 21.
CHAPTER 5
AN AUTHORITY NO LONGER

The following day, Madalon did not return to the fields. “At gun-fire” the next morning, one witness testified, Willem went to the tree where they had left Madalon the night before and discovered that she had died.\textsuperscript{1} Anyone who saw her would have immediately realized that she had been beaten to death. When one of the men saw the body in the morning, “the marks of punishment were very visible,” he recalled.\textsuperscript{2} As the Fiscal explained, Madalon’s death resulted in “the utter astonishment of many of the negroes” on the plantation.\textsuperscript{3} They had believed Willem’s claims that she could not die while under his power. And they knew that the Minje Mama dance’s violence was not supposed to heal, not kill. Something had gone horribly wrong. Willem had taken the beating too far, perhaps, or maybe he was not the powerful Obeah practitioner he claimed to be. Madalon’s death created a major crisis for Willem, for the drivers who had called him in, and for the people on Op Hoop van Beter.

The immediate problem, of course, was getting rid of the corpse, since the plantation manager would soon take note of Madalon’s absence and begin searching for her. And if he

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 40.
found the body, the numerous cuts, bruises, and welts it bore would prompt an even more
dangerous investigation. But even this urgent and seemingly simple task proved difficult for
Willem—and exposed a more serious problem for him.

A small group of slaves, who had accompanied Willem that morning, untied
Madalon’s body from the sand-koker tree “and threw it in the grass to hide it”—a temporary
solution until someone could permanently dispose of the corpse in a better location.4 But
when Willem ordered them to bury the body, they refused. Willem “grew angry, and drove
them away,” one witness recalled. “Willem said it was of no consequence whether they had
buried the body or not, as he would do that,” another witness testified. Willem boasted that
“He was Minje Mama; he had plenty of people to assist him.”5 But Willem soon found that
no one would in fact help him. For with Madalon’s death, he faced a sudden, and almost
complete, loss of authority. For the people on Op Hoop van Beter, Madalon’s death was a
sign that the Obeah practitioner they had brought to “bring things on the estate to order” had
failed them.

Indeed, far from being able to help the people of Op Hoop van Beter, Willem had
created a new set of dangers. If the clandestine Obeah rituals that had taken place on the
plantation were brought to light, not only those who had actively participated but everyone
who had failed to alert authorities would face not only the displeasure of the plantation
overseer but also criminal investigation and torture by colonial officials. The people of Op
Hoop van Beter no doubt knew of the severe punishments inflicted on Hans and the other
people of Plantation Demtichem only two years earlier. How the various groups of actors—

4 Ibid., 15.
5 Ibid., 29, 25.
Willem, the drivers, those who had participated in the rituals, Madalon’s husband and other bystanders—responded to Madalon’s death reveals both how complete Willem’s loss of authority was and, paradoxically, how desperate people on the plantation were to keep the entire matter secret for as long as possible.

Madalon’s husband, Munro, traveled to the plantation on Sunday—four days after she was found dead—and confronted Willem. Immediately, Willem ordered a small group of slaves to beat Munro. But Fortuyn quickly “interfered in his [Munro’s] behalf,” one witness testified. He added: “Fortuyn also said he had brought the Attetta Sara on the estate, and that he [Willem] could not beat him, Munro, for nothing.”

Like the people who refused to dispose of Madalon’s body, Fortuyn would no longer be intimidated by Willem. These outright refusals to obey Willem’s orders in the wak of Madalon’s death show that Willem’s earlier authority did not rest on physical violence or threats alone: it was also based on his social status as someone believed to wield considerable spiritual power. And he had now lost that authority.

With Willem’s authority collapsed, the drivers sought to take charge. Soon after the drivers realized Madalon had been killed, they went to the manager and told him that she had run away. This was a plausible explanation—enslaved people in Berbice deserted plantations as they did in every slave society—and it solved the problem of her disappearance in a way that focused investigation away from the plantation. If nothing else, it bought the drivers some much-needed time to permanently dispose of the corpse and convince everyone else on the plantation to keep quiet about Madalon’s death.

6 Ibid., 23.
7 Ibid., 42.
Later the same day, the head drivers ordered a small group of people to bury Madalon’s body. But in doing so, they found their authority tested. Since no one would obey Willem, it was now up to the drivers to reassert their authority on the plantation, especially if they hoped to avoid severe punishment for their role in Madalon’s death. But once again, those ordered to bury Madalon refused to do so. According to trial testimony, Barron “was one of five [persons]…who brought the woman behind a dam, and concealed her; a quarrel arising amongst these five, they returned, and 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, however, Barron “met the driver on the walk, and the driver said to him, Yesterday you refused to bury that body, to-day we have done it ourselves.” The lead driver “told [Barron] that they had buried the body without his assistance, and put the estate in order, or to rights again. The driver further told him that he had sunk the body in a small coriall with weights,” in the river or one of the plantation’s canals. By burying the body themselves, the drivers demonstrated their willingness to take some level of personal responsibility in the conspiracy, thereby proving to the other people on the plantation that they were serious about keeping Madalon’s death a secret and that they were not going to simply blame other people for her death, as Barron and others feared.

The drivers had succeeded in convincing everyone on the plantation that they all had an interest in keeping the matter quiet. Indeed, the crisis provoked by Madalon’s death

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8 Ibid., 19 [ital. in original].
9 Ibid., 19.
10 Ibid., 20, 22.
united the enslaved community on Op Hoop van Beter around the shared goal of avoiding punishment for their complicity in her murder. For several weeks, none of the hundreds of persons who knew that Willem had killed Madalon told plantation managers or other white authorities what they had seen or heard. This ability to successfully keep Madalon’s death a secret for a long period of time is remarkable, and raises questions about the techniques the drivers and Willem used in order to contain the knowledge of Madalon’s death and the practice of Obeah on the plantation.

Despite their reevaluation of Willem’s authority, many of the people who knew of Madalon’s death were still hesitant or unwilling to tell white authorities what had happened to her. Part of the reason, no doubt, was that the people with the most responsibility for Madalon’s death, including Willem and the drivers, had threatened those who witnessed the Minje Mama dance with death should they tell anyone. There was the loyalty oath they had taken earlier, and several witnesses testified that the drivers told them “that if they revealed it to the Fiscal, or other white person, they should be hung.” This threat, they explained, “prevented them at first from telling the truth.”\(^\text{11}\) At the same time, it is likely that those who might have wanted to tell the manager or Fiscal what had happened feared being punished for participating in Obeah rituals, or provoking the wrath of those whom they would testify against. For a host of different reasons, no one was eager to talk to whites about Madalon’s death.

For over a month, Willem and the drivers succeeded in keeping everyone quiet and leading whites to believe that Madalon had run away. But in mid-September, an enslaved man who lived on a nearby plantation told the manager of the plantation where he lived what

\(^{11}\) *Ibid.*, 35.
had really happened to Madalon. This manager then immediately told the owner of Op Hoop van Beter what he had learned, and also contacted Sterk, the militia commander. When Sterk asked Vigilant what had happened, Vigilant explained that Madalon “had been denounced to the gang of that estate by the negro of Buses Lust [Willem],” and identified Willem as “the promoter of the said Minje Mama dance” which cost Madalon her life.\(^{12}\)

If the manager of Op Hoop van Beter had already known what had happened to Madalon, or that the drivers had called Willem to the plantation because of the epidemic, as some witnesses claimed, he had good reason to keep the matter quiet himself. Indeed, the practice of Obeah and the murder of one of his slaves would have been seen by the Fiscal and other planters as evidence of his failure to maintain adequate discipline and control on the plantation. When Sterk first informed the manager that he suspected Madalon had been murdered, the manager responded: “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.”\(^{13}\) If the manager knew what had happened to Madalon, as this testimony suggests, he might have been motivated to keep quiet by a desire to avoid involving outsiders or higher authorities in his affairs.

For the next month and a half, the Fiscal interrogated anyone who he thought might have witnessed or participated in the Minje Mama dance, in an effort to find out who was responsible for Madalon’s death and, more importantly, how she had been killed. The Fiscal thought this investigation was so important that he temporarily moved judicial proceedings to the plantation itself, where he interrogated more than half a dozen slaves. Unfortunately for

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 5, 13.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 13.
the Fiscal, the enslaved people on the plantation apparently “had preconcerted and agreed upon a certain statement, declaring their total ignorance of the subjects of inquiry.”\(^{14}\) In the face of shared jeopardy, the enslaved people of Op Hoop van Beter united in the interest of protecting themselves from the Fiscal.

Frustrated by the uniform claims of ignorance he encountered, the Fiscal resorted to extracting testimony forcibly. Early in the course of his investigation, he requested and received the Lieutenant-Governor’s permission 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.”\(^{15}\) And the trial record contains hints of the kinds of violence that the Fiscal employed to elicit testimony. One overseer described the interrogation of Barron: “On the negro Barron first being called he refused to give a decisive answer to any question that was asked. After Mr. Sterk struck the negro on the side of the head he said he would tell him the whole truth.”\(^{16}\) When subsequently brought before the Fiscal, Barron admitted that Willem had come to the plantation in order to perform the Minje Mama dance, and provided a detailed account of Madalon’s death.\(^{17}\) Other reluctant witnesses only testified when the Fiscal used other slaves to pressure them to reveal what they knew. Frederick—who wound up being one of the most forthcoming witnesses—refused to tell the

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 6, 17-18.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 20-21.
Fiscal anything until he was “expostulated with by the witness Vigilant, who pressed him to relate the truth.”18

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Madalon’s unexpected death and the enslaved community’s reaction shows what happened when an Obeah ritual did not work out as planned—when an Obeah practitioner failed. The enslaved community’s refusal to assist Willem when Madalon died, disproving his repeated claims that he could protect her, suggests that the social authority of Obeah practitioners, great as it could be, was also tenuous and was based upon demonstrable success. Willem’s ability to persuade or force others to obey him lasted only as long as they saw him as a spiritual authority. While Obeah practitioners such as Willem could gain a community’s trust and reach high levels of influence among their contemporaries, they could also lose such power when they failed to conduct rituals according to the expectations of those who participated in them.

One pattern that emerges in the Fiscal’s investigation of Madalon’s murder is the cleavage between Willem and the drivers, on one hand, and the other enslaved people on Op Hoop van Beter, on the other. Nearly all those who admitted that the Minje Mama dance had been performed blamed Willem and the drivers for Madalon’s death and claimed that they only participated or remained silent because they feared for their own lives. Those who took leading roles in the Minje Mama dance—including Willem, and the lead drivers, Primo and Mey—never wavered in their claim that they had nothing to do with her death and knew nothing about her disappearance. Although Mey admitted that he knew Willem, for example, he claimed that Willem was “not at all” in the habit of visiting the plantation, that “The Minje

18 Ibid., 15.
Mama dance was not danced on the estate” and that “Willem did not order any of the negroes to be flogged.” Primo similarly claimed that he “did not know what [Willem] came for, or to do,” and that “the Minje Mama dance was not danced on the plantation.” He also told the Fiscal that he had “not seen any negro flogged on the estate by order of Willem or any other slave.”19

As for Willem, he claimed that he only went to Op Hoop van Beter in order “to see [his] wife Johanna.” He said that he did not know Madalon and that he had never organized the Minje Mama dance or any other Obeah ritual.20 Unlike Hans, who admitted that he possessed special powers but claimed that he only used them for good, Willem never admitted that he was any sort of healer or Obeah practitioner. Willem’s only strategy of defense—aside from steadfastly professing his innocence—was to emphasize the fact that no one had been able to locate 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.”21 Willem knew, of course, that Madalon’s body lay at the bottom of some murky river or canal, where it would have been all but impossible to find.

Although the drivers’ decision to bring Willem to the plantation and participate in Minje Mama dance was intended to restore the spiritual and social balance on Op Hoop van Beter, it ultimately created an even more fractured community. Indeed, many witnesses sought to avoid punishment by testifying against one another or blaming others—the drivers

19 Ibid., 29-31.
20 Ibid., 14.
21 Ibid., 34.
or Willem—for their own involvement. Indeed, the only reason we know what happened on this plantation is that many of the enslaved people interrogated by the Fiscal admitted to having seen others participate Madalon’s murder, effectively condemning members of their community.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

As the Fiscal’s investigation into Madalon’s death and the practice of the Minje Mama dance on Op Hoop van Beter make clear, Obeah in Berbice was not exclusively linked to slave resistance. The trial records analyzed here show that some types of Obeah had less to do with harming white people than they did with managing conflict and responding to social crises within slave communities. Indeed, as the Fiscal realized, the practice of Obeah raised important questions about authority, legitimacy, and power on the plantation.

After hearing testimony from more than a dozen witnesses, the Fiscal leveled formal charges against six individuals: Kees, Corydon, Allegro, Mey, Primo, and, of course, Willem. The Fiscal aggressively prosecuted Willem and the people who assisted him, with a particular focus on the drivers. He was primarily concerned with their failure to obey the laws of the colony and, more importantly, their flagrant disregard for the established plantation power structure and their submission to an Obeah practitioner who was, in the Fiscal’s eyes, an illegitimate authority.

The Fiscal argued that the Court should sentence Kees, the logie driver, to be taken to the plantation and “stand with a rope round his neck fastened to the mangoe-tree under which the woman Madalon was suspended,” and then be flogged “at the discretion of the
honorourable Court, and afterwards worked in chains…for the period of seven years.”¹ This severe punishment, the Fiscal reasoned, was justified on the grounds that “such conduct on the part of drivers having the direction of slaves cannot be tolerated but on the contrary ought to be severely punished.”² Kees begged for mercy on the ground that he was “but a boy, and [had] only lately” been appointed as a driver and therefore “had not the authority” to stand up to Willem, unlike the lead drivers. Moreover, Kees claimed, “if not ordered by Willem, who also flogged me, I should not have beat the woman.”³ Yet the Court convicted Kees of neglecting his duty as a driver and sentenced him to receive one hundred lashes.⁴ Corydon and Allegro similarly stood accused of “losing sight of the duty and obedience due to their proprietors, and submitting themselves to the authority of the negro Willem.” The Fiscal suggested the Court sentence them “to be severely punished on Op Hoop van Beter, in presence of the gang, and, moreover…to work in chains on said estate for the space of three years.”⁵ Although Allegro was “ill, and unable to attend and take his trial at the present session,” the court sentenced Corydon “to receive One Hundred Lashes.”⁶

The Fiscal argued that Primo and Mey deserved more severe sentences because, as lead drivers, they needed to be held to a higher level of responsibility than other slaves. In addition to murdering Madalon, the Fiscal accused them of “subjecting themselves (the

¹ Ibid., 44.
² Ibid., 11.
³ Ibid., 32-33. According to slave registration returns, Kees was the plantation’s “Overseer on the Logie” as early as 1819. See “Return of Slaves attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter.”
⁴ Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 10-11.
⁵ Ibid., 44-45.
⁶ Ibid., 10-11.
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.” The Fiscal was most concerned with their willingness to recognize Willem as an authority figure whose orders superseded those given by the plantation manager. He accused them of failing to maintain “the authority confided to them, by enforcing due subordination on the estate,” and allowing the Minje Mama dance to be performed when they knew that it was prohibited by law. The real crime, the Fiscal implied, was their failure to challenge Willem’s power and faithfully represent the plantation manager’s interests.

Although the Court agreed that “such conduct on the part of the drivers having the charge of slaves cannot be tolerated, but on the contrary ought to be severely punished,” it chose to give the lead drivers a less severe, yet still brutal, sentence of three hundred lashes each—far beyond the traditional legal limit. In addition, they were to be “brand-marked, and degraded as drivers, afterwards to be worked in chains” for the next year.

Like the other defendants, Willem stood accused of murdering Madalon. However, the Fiscal was more concerned with Willem’s ability, as an Obeah practitioner, to convince a wide range of people to submit to his authority, especially since this meant disobeying the plantation manager and violating a well-known colonial law. The Fiscal therefore accused Willem “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

7 Ibid., 41, 42.

8 Until 1826, the maximum number of lashes that a slave in Berbice could legally be given was thirty-nine. The maximum number was lowered to twenty-five lashes in 1826, unless the Fiscal or the Court ordered otherwise. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves,” 309.

9 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 10.
proprietors, by instituting and causing to be danced…the Minje Mama dance.” Equally reprehensible, in the Fiscal’s opinion, 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, the prisoner’s, extent of power.” In addition to his ability to “influence the minds of the gang on plantation Op Hoop van Beter, in the belief of his possessing supernatural power,” Willem was accused of having “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 that all attempts to assert such power by any individual can only tend to the subversion of all rule and subordination,” the Fiscal argued, Willem’s crimes needed to be punished with the utmost severity.10

As the Fiscal saw it, Madalon’s death was only the symptom of a larger problem: the breakdown of authority and order on the plantation. If Willem could force others to help him beat and ultimately kill an enslaved woman, what else might he be capable of? Slaves were not supposed to be able to exert this kind of influence over one another; that kind of power was supposed to be reserved for whites. In the minds of colonial officials, the threat Obeah posed to the social order they hoped to maintain had little to do, in this case, with slave revolts or violence directed against whites. Instead, they feared Obeah because it could function as an alternative system of health care, community justice, and retribution within the plantation world.11

10 Ibid., 39, 41.
11 de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right,’” 42.
On January 14, 1822—more than five months after Madalon had been killed—the Court found Willem guilty of her murder and of practicing Obeah. The Court decided on a sentence severe enough, it hoped, that in the future enslaved people throughout the colony would think twice about practicing Obeah or consulting an Obeah practitioner. Willem was to be removed from the jail where he had been confined since mid-September of the previous year, and taken to Op Hoop van Beter, where he would be “delivered into the hands of the public executioner, and in the presence of the Court to be hung by the neck on the Mangoe tree under which the negress Madalon was suspended during her aforesaid punishment, until the said prisoner be dead.” Afterwards, the Court specified, 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.” His body was to be buried under the same tree—the macabre symbolism clear to all.¹

This gruesome execution and mutilation were designed to do more than punish Willem. As Vincent Brown has shown, planters hoped that this “spiritual terror” would send a clear message to other slaves: this is what happens when you break our laws. “Dead bodies, dismembered and disfigured as they were,” Brown writes, “would be symbols of the

¹ Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 9.
power and dominion of slave masters.” Placing Willem’s body under the mango tree and his head on a stake was also part of an effort to make this a haunted place, “with memories and narratives of crime and punishment.”2 It is unlikely that anyone who witnessed or heard about Willem’s fate would soon forget what had taken place under the mango tree on Op Hoop van Beter.

Four days after reaching a verdict, the Court accompanied Willem and the other convicted slaves to Op Hoop van Beter. According to John Wray, who traveled to the plantation in order to witness the execution, “the scene of the Estate was most solemn. The governor and 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 the sentences were read aloud, Wray recalled, Willem “walked firmly to the Tree, and told the Executioner to fasten the rope well,” and then “he was launched into an awful Eternity.”3

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3 John Wray letter, Feb. 6, 1822; *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 12. Also see da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 112; and de Barros, “‘Setting Things Right,’” 42.
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