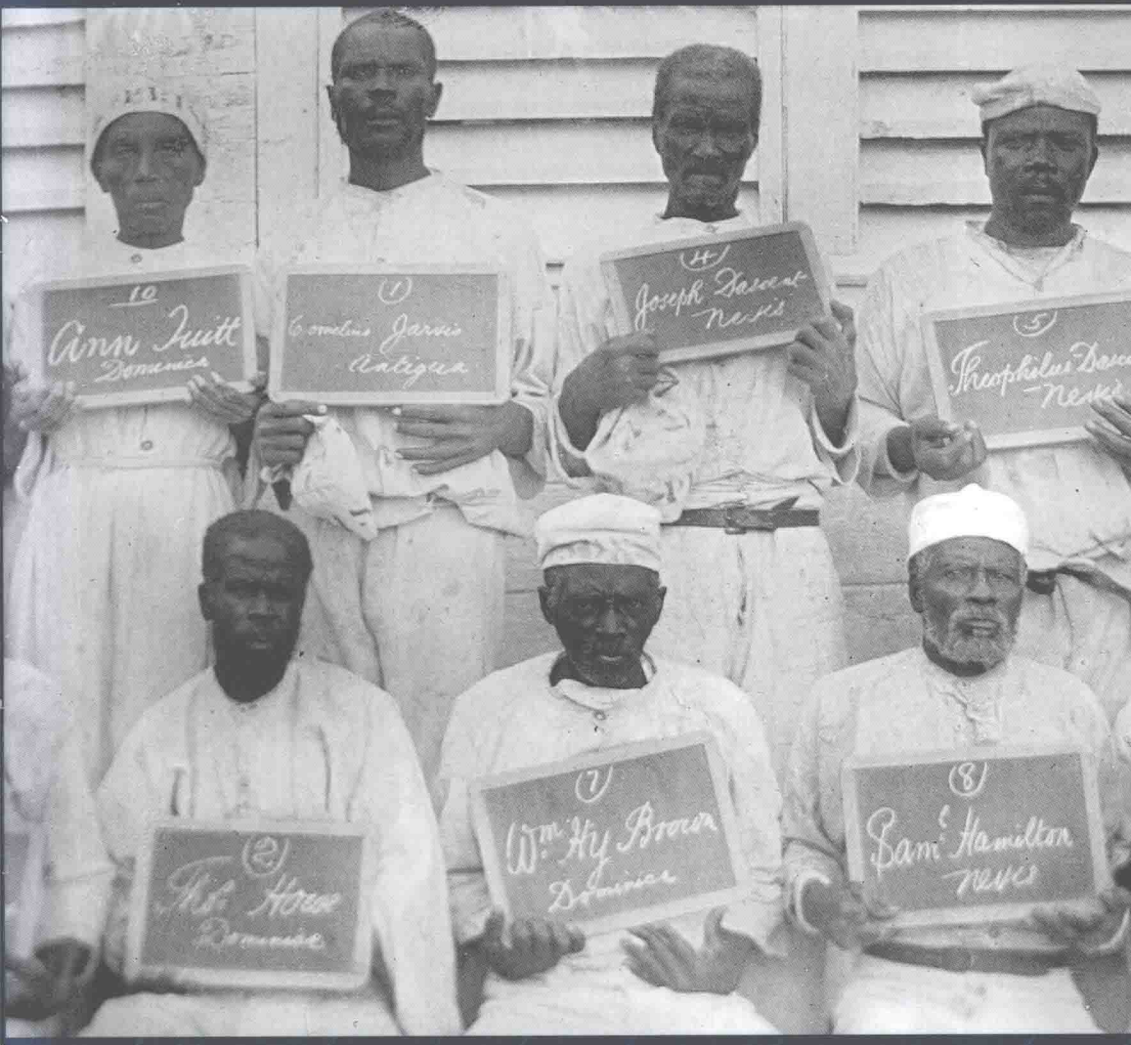
DIANA PATON & MAARIT FORDE, *editors*



Obeah and Other Powers

THE POLITICS OF CARIBBEAN RELIGION AND HEALING

Other Powers

The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing

DIANA PATON & MAARIT FORDE, editors

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Foreword

ERNA BRODBER

One afternoon when I was six and in standard 2, sitting quietly while the teacher, Mr. Grant, wrote our assignment on the blackboard, I heard a girl scream as if she were frightened. Mr. Grant must have heard it, too, for he turned as if to see whether that frightened scream had come from one of us, his charges. My classmates looked at me. Which wasn't strange: I had a reputation for knowing the answer. They must have thought I would know about the scream. As it happened, all I could think about was how strange, just at the time when I needed it, the girl had screamed.

I had been swimming through the clouds, unwillingly connected to a small party of adults who were purposefully going somewhere, a destination I suddenly sensed meant danger for me. Naturally I didn't want to go any further with them, but I didn't know how to communicate this to adults and ones intent on doing me harm. At the girl's scream, they swam away, quickly leaving me to tread the clouds alone but feeling that I had been abandoned and could justifiably do as I wished—and I wished to return to my place on the bench in standard 2, ready to solve the problems that Mr. Grant had written on the board. The feeling of being carried away and then abandoned to tread the clouds by myself is one I can never forget.

Twenty-four years later, suffering from a thyroid problem that brought me strange sensations, I tried to describe for my endocrinologist, a West Indian of East Indian extraction, some of these sensations, recalling for him the feeling of being carried away and treading air, which had returned. I thought this disclosure would help toward a diagnosis, which had been evading my medical team. He looked away from me, muttering that "we would now try psychiatry." *Is not everything good fi eat, good fi talk.* No matter how much contact we have had with a world not governed by the five senses, Caribbean university professors like my endocrinologist and I, Indo or Afro, are not supposed to admit to having them. A higgler or a cultivator in rural Jamaica—Indo or Afro—upon

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hearing my experience would have either responded with a similar one or offered a translation. I had read my culture wrongly. How stupid of me.

Understand my surprise, then, when Patricia Murray—professor at London Metropolitan University, a native of Great Britain, nonblack, and therefore, I assumed, with little personal experience of being molested by spirits—invited me to participate in a conference on "Religion and Spirituality in a Postcolonial Context: Working the Parallel World." She must have read my face, for she modified, "It is time that this aspect of African and African Caribbean life be taken seriously." This conference was aborted, but soon thereafter I was invited to an even more explicit one: "Obeah and Other Powers."

Funny. The British in 1760, as a result of the African Jamaican Tacky's rebellion, had outlawed the practice of obeah, and anti-obeah legislation has been on the statute books ever since. In order to read the de Laurence books, some of which are said to be used by obeah workers, I, with an academic interest in this parallel world of mine, had to go to Trinidad, for these books are banned in Jamaica. Yet these academics in British Newcastle were inciting people to meet for nearly a week to meditate on such things!

Perhaps the time has indeed come for these things to be taken seriously, as Patricia said. At the annual pre-Emancipation reasoning in my village, Dr. Adolph Edwards, author of the unpublished Ph.D. thesis "The Development of Criminal Law in Jamaica," asked to share with us his knowledge of legislation, and particularly obeah laws, designed expressly for handling "our" people in the days of slavery. Some young visiting academics heckled, attacking the messenger. Their behavior was an expression of frustration and anger: anger at the treatment of their ancestors—"ancestral anger," I call it—but more, frustration at knowing so little about the system of thought that their ancestors had celebrated, frustration at being robbed of the connection with their ancestors that could allow them to make a good defense of them, frustration that now initiates into Akan, Dagara, and Yoruba traditions; they still did not know the points at which their grandparents had connected with these traditions. They were now living with burning candles, wearing full white, keeping their heads covered, and leaving plates of food in their yards for the ancestors, but they still didn't know if they were connected with the feared obeah man down the road, formerly the butt of jokes in their friendship networks. Their anger was at the knowledge vacuum that made positioning themselves in the stream of spiritual history impossible, and that forced them to wonder if their newfound spiritual rituals would really lessen the sense of wearing the wrong robes that had driven them out of the Euro-American churches and in search of the African spiritual forms.

In our very active post-lecture discussion, the village passed a resolution that we should petition for the removal of the obeah laws from the statute books. Could this be enough? Whatever the answer, it is clear that enough of us in the Caribbean care about obeah and other powers. And didn't Professor Barry Chevannes of the University of the West Indies, at an international conference in his honor, sprinkle water at the four corners of the platform to acknowledge the presence of and to thank his ancestors for past kindness? We are beginning to see and to respect the alternative world that our grandparents knew to exist. But deleting an entry from a list of laws is not knowledge of a system—especially one so smothered under a bushel by British colonial policy, so bereft of the natural light that growth and development needs, that what is left might be a poor representation of what was. What my young academic friends stepping into the observance of African traditional rites need is knowledge of what exists and knowledge of what had been. Unfortunately, the meaning behind esoteric knowledge such as obeah and other powers is normally handed down from ear to ear. Can the breach fostered by colonial education systems be mended so that conduits can appear? Perhaps not. My young friends will have to design their own techniques for spiritual connection. What they need more than anything else is an environment sympathetic to this kind of creation.

Many of us in the Caribbean feel torn by the experience of living with two systems of thought that are difficult to reconcile. I for one was happier at the Newcastle conference than at any other that I have attended in my many years in academia. I think this is because I sensed not so much an attempt to use field data toward general sociological theory, but more an effort to understand a fact of my Caribbean life. I had company in this exercise of trying to understand; I was comforted. The papers presented and the post-paper discussions made me feel that data were now available to help our college-trained medical practitioners and our spirit-based practitioners make common cause, and to help our seminary-trained ministers of religion and our spirit-based ones find the path toward each other that I know the former have been trying to chart since the 1970s.

There of course have been other gatherings and sets of papers, but the one arranged by Maarit Forde and Diana Paton at Newcastle University has been much more than the usual panels at a conference. It has been for me the first to focus totally on obeah and other powers, bringing as it did the parallel world into full public view—and thus not only providing information about what was and perhaps is, but also helping to create this sympathetic environment that my young friends need for further and more private exploration. This

work, valorizing the thoughts and actions of our ancestors, treating them in a matter-of-fact and therefore humanistic way, will eventuate in their shaking from their bones the epithets "stupid" and "backward," and we of this generation soon being able to share about our out-of-body experiences without thinking ourselves mentally ill, to leave plates of food outside in our yards for our ancestors without wondering how close we are to breaching the laws governing the practice of obeah.

Finally, reparations: the colonial powers have been "spirit thieves." Their obeah legislation has stymied the spiritual growth and development of transported Africans. Repairing the breach is about valorizing what they wrongly demonized. It is some kind of justice and a lighting of the way forward that descendants of those who put the bushel over Caribbean expressions of African spirituality, and those whose ancestors were thus bound, are working together—whether in conferences as college-trained intellectuals or in the field as informants—to lift the bushel and retrieve knowledge. One happy, though perhaps unintended, outcome could be the lessening of the quantum of ancestral anger felt by the descendants of Africans enslaved in the New World, as I have discussed in my book *The Second Generation of Freemen in Jamaica, 1907–1955* (University Press of Florida, 2004). May it be so indeed for the several young Afro-Caribbean academics who are waiting for this collection—not to teach about African spirituality but rather to strengthen them on their personal journey of finding their ancestors' hands, and so to link their hearts and souls to the past, allowing them to walk upright into the future, now plugged into the right ancestral source and now free from the burden of frustration and anger.

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of collaboration between the two editors, as part of a larger project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, titled "Colonial Rule and Spiritual Power: Obeah, the State, and Caribbean Culture." It took shape at a conference, "Obeah and Other Powers," held at Newcastle University in July 2008. We would like to thank all the participants at that conference, and particularly the contributors to this book, whose initial papers made the conference so stimulating and who subsequently worked efficiently to turn their papers into book chapters. We have both learned a great deal from collaborating with them. We owe a special debt to those who generously gave their time and intellectual energy to act as chairs and panel discussants at the conference: Juanita de Barros, Jean Besson, Erna Brodber, Richard Drayton, Michael Jagessar, Projit Mukharji, Patricia Murray, Karen Fog Olwig, Stephan Palmié, James Procter, Kate Ramsey, Terence Ranger, Patrick Taylor, and David Trotman. Robert Hill delivered the keynote address at the conference; it provided a typically rich stimulus to the discussions. Unfortunately, Hill was unable to revise his paper for the book, an absence that we regret. The conference and book have depended on the financial support of the Leverhulme Trust, Newcastle University, and the Northern Centre for the History of Medicine, and the practical support of Colette Barker, Janice Cummin, Geof Ellingham, Pat Harrison, Michelle Houston, Melanie Kidd, Tom Kirk, Helen McKee, Bob Stoate, Sam Turner, and Craig White. Thanks to all of them.

At Duke University Press, we are grateful to Valerie Millholland and Miriam Angress, who supported the project from the beginning. We also thank the initially anonymous readers of our manuscript, Aisha Khan and Paul Johnson, who greatly helped us to improve it.

The onset of health problems forced Karen McCarthy Brown to withdraw from the Newcastle conference. Brown's work has been an inspiration for many of the contributors to this book; we dedicate it to her.

Contents

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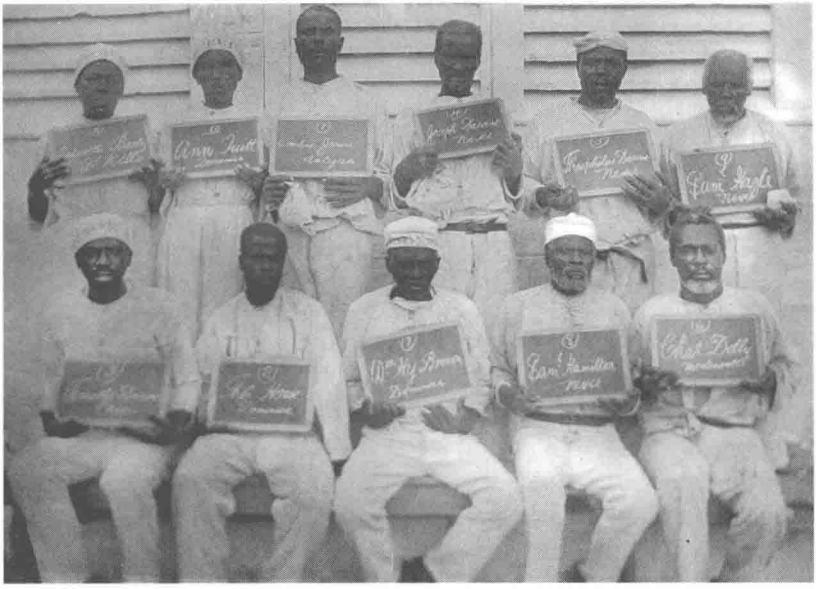
Introduction

MAARIT FORDE & DIANA PATON

In 1905 the prison authorities at the Antigua jail, which served as the central prison for the Leeward Islands, employed a photographer to take individual and group photographs of at least eleven people who had been convicted of practicing obeah. The group shot (figure I.1) depicts nine men and two women in two rows, all staring with their faces toward the camera. All wear white prison uniforms, identical except for the differences between men and women. Each holds a small board on which is chalked his or her name and the island where she or he was convicted. The individual photographs were pasted onto preprinted documents recording that the photographed individual had been "convicted for practising Obeah under the Leeward Islands Obeah Act No 6 of 1904," and documenting his or her sentence, place of birth, age, marital status, trade or occupation ("obeahman" in some cases), religion, and a series of physical descriptors, such as skin color, hair color, and height. The images belong to the genre of the police photograph or mug shot, the chalked names providing a means for state authorities to identify these people. These photographs and identifying information were circulated "to all the neighbouring Islands, both British and Foreign," in the hope that the individuals pictured would be kept under surveillance upon their release, wherever they should travel.[1]

Someone working in the prison or the colonial civil service must have decided to group together this particular set of prisoners—obeah convicts—to photograph them collectively and individually, suggesting the significance that the colonial authorities gave to this category of crime at this time. In one sense, the photographs allowed for the fixing, classification, and control of the group. They record the fact that these prisoners had been temporarily brought to a point of stasis by confinement in prison, and thus suggest one of the themes of this book: the significance of state power, and more specifically, state hostility,



1.1 Photograph of eleven men and women convicted of practicing obeah, taken in the Antigua jail in 1905. Enclosed in Knollys to Lyttelton, no. 222, May 22, 1905, CO 152/287, National Archives, London. Reproduced by permission of the National Archives.

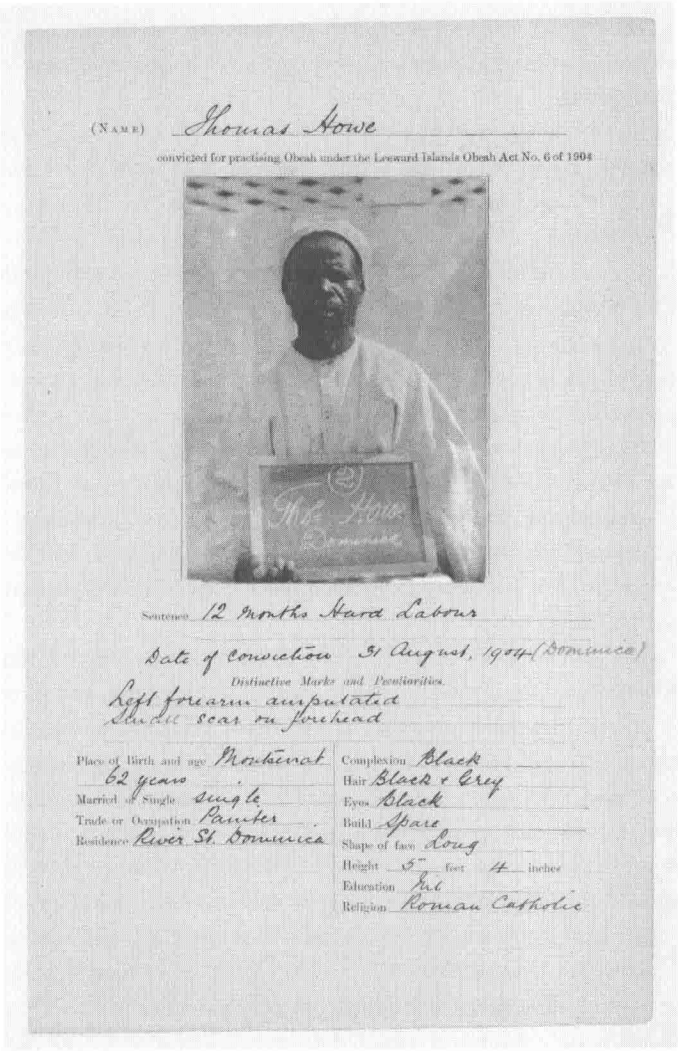
in shaping the environment within which Caribbean religions were sustained and practiced.

But the photographs do not merely record the disciplining of their subjects. The individuals photographed are not simply controlled by the photographer, but rather, in minor ways, take hold of the presentation of their clothing: in the group shot some wear their prison hats, for instance, while others hold them in their hands. More significant, the posing of the subjects in two rows, one seated, the other standing, resembles a photograph of a school or college graduating class, or a record of a professional convention, even more than it does a photograph of prisoners. And this resemblance is not entirely misleading, for a great deal of communication and exchange of information must have taken place inside the prison among these people from across the Eastern Caribbean. Only half jokingly, we could suggest that this photograph depicts a convention of Eastern Caribbean obeah practitioners, courtesy of the Antiguan jail authorities. Like participants in a professional convention, the men and women in this photograph were likely to have been competitors for clients

but also sharers of information and knowledge. The hidden communication that lies behind the picture evokes a second theme raised in *Obeah and Other Powers*: the active role of practitioners in reshaping the religious traditions in which they participated.

As recorded by the chalkboards that the prisoners hold, all these convicts except for Cornelius Jarvis (back row, third from left) had been convicted outside Antigua. Other sources reveal that many people convicted of practicing obeah in the Eastern Caribbean in this period, including some of those photographed, were embedded in regional networks of their own making in addition to those produced by their conviction. For instance, Thomas Howe, pictured second from left in the front row, was tried in Dominica but had been born elsewhere: St. Kitts according to a newspaper report, Montserrat according to the information recorded on his prison docket (figure I.2).[2] Other convicts had connections to the Francophone and Hispanic Caribbean, as well as to other British colonies.[3] These connections suggest a third theme with which the chapters of this book engage: the importance of mobility in constructing obeah and the other powers in which we are interested, and the permeability of the borders between colonial empires that frequently confine Caribbeanist scholarship.

This book deals with religious practice in the Caribbean, primarily within contexts that have come to be known as obeah, Vodou, and Santería, and their relationship to power. It includes chapters by historians and anthropologists that discuss Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, Tobago, Martinique, Suriname, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean coast of Central America, as well as connections between several of these places.[4] The contributors are concerned with periods ranging from the late eighteenth century to the present, although most focus on the period after 1890. While they range widely in theme, the chapters share an interest in thinking through how, and by whom, the fields of religious beliefs and practices they discuss have been produced and reproduced, rather than a concern with pinning down what these formations were and are. They are concerned with the contexts in which the reproduction of Caribbean religion has taken place, and with what such religions and discourses about them *do*. By that, we mean both that the chapters in this book are concerned with the actions of those who identify with particular religious movements, and that they seek to understand the cultural and political work done by hostility to, representation of, and attempts to suppress those movements' beliefs and practices. In these concerns, this work is connected also to wider developments in history and anthropology—in particular, to the growing emphasis on analyses that approach societies and cultures not as bounded entities, but as


(NAME) Thomas Howe

convicted for practising Obeah under the Leeward Islands Obeah Act No. 6 of 1904

Sentence 12 months Hard Labour

Date of Conviction 31 August, 1904 (Dominica)

Distinctive Marks and Peculiarities

Left forearm amputated
Small scar on forehead

Place of Birth and age Montserrat 62 years
Married or Single Single
Trade or Occupation Painter
Residence River St. Dominica

Complexion Black
Hair Black & Grey
Eyes Black
Build Spare
Shape of face Long
Height 5 feet 4 inches
Education Nil
Religion Roman Catholic

1.2 Tabular information about and photograph of Thomas Howe, convicted in Dominica in August 1904 of practicing obeah. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

processual formations that are always being made and remade, and to lines of questioning that unveil the historical construction of many institutions, including religion, that have previously been taken for granted.

The title *Obeah and Other Powers* refers on one hand to the cross-Caribbean nature of the book's subject matter. Alongside discussions of obeah, we present studies of "other powers": formations that have occupied similar, although not identical, places to obeah in Caribbean societies. These include the power that animates Cuban *regla ocha* and *palo*; the power of the *lwa* in Haiti; and the power of the spirits accessed by *brujos* and *brujas* in Puerto Rico. At the same time, the other powers to which we refer are those that, to speak at the most general level, have dominated the lives of Caribbean people for the past five centuries. Obeah and the other powers analyzed in this book were formed, from the start, in the context of the relationships that produced the Caribbean in its modern, post-1492 form. They were produced by the power of capital and colonialism to transport millions of Africans across oceans against their will, and then set them down as enslaved people who had to rework their existing knowledge to provide some protection in a new, terror-filled setting. In the aftermath of slavery, these powers transformed as hundreds of thousands of people from India, and to a lesser extent China, migrated to the Caribbean under indenture. Asian migrants' religious experience influenced and was influenced by those who were already there. But the religious practices and knowledge of Caribbean people were also formed by a more mundane and yet highly significant set of everyday powers: the power of states to criminalize some practices and legitimize others; the power of occupying armies to rewrite constitutions and reorient economies; and the power of writers, filmmakers, lawyers, and scholars to represent Caribbean practices, both to those with little knowledge of the region and to those who live there. Such representations of Caribbean religious formations, whether by "insiders" or "outsiders"—however we might define those terms—have been carefully watched and analyzed by those they purport to represent.

Finally, the other powers of the book's title refer to a third mode of power: the power of millions of people in the Caribbean, whose relationships with one another, and with the forces of capital and the state, have been mediated through and experienced within religious formations and discourses. This power has on many occasions had a critical, combative edge, mobilizing people against colonial and authoritarian rule. It has often been unrecognizable from the point of view of conventional politics, especially the social democratic tradition that has largely dominated Anglophone Caribbean politics. It is not sufficient to conceptualize it in terms of resistance, however, for re-

ligiously mobilized powers in the Caribbean have also worked to divide, to maintain boundaries, and to generate hierarchy among non-elite Caribbean people. While many of the chapters in this book elucidate the creativity and power of Caribbean religious practitioners, they situate agency in the context of structural frameworks set up by political economy and cultural politics in the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean.

THE POLITICS OF NAMING

Examining Caribbean religion raises questions about definitions and categorization that ultimately concern methodology and epistemology. As Talal Asad has argued, the dominant scholarship and discourse in post-medieval Europe defined religion as an entity with a traceable essence, separate from other sectors of social life, such as politics, law, or science. In an enlightened, reformed Europe, religion became a system that could be studied and experienced on its own. Enlightenment thinkers saw "religion" as a private affiliation, actively separated from politics and the public sphere. The claim that religion and politics are separate realms became a mark of modernity.[5]

The chapters in this book reject this separation between religion and the rest of social life. To borrow a set of terms from economic anthropology, we adopt a substantivist rather than formalist perspective. Formalist positions have maintained that the principles of neoclassical economics can apply to all societies, as the pursuit of maximization by rational actors is universal. Substantivist economic approaches, on the other hand, have argued for plural models of economy that differentiate between capitalist and pre- or non-capitalist societies. Instead of an autonomous sector or sphere, substantivists have understood economy as embedded in a variety of religious, kinship, political, and other institutions. Similarly, we argue that religion is better understood as embedded in politics, economy, kinship, and other relevant aspects of social life, and that attempts to define religion based on universally applicable criteria tend to be ethnocentrically biased.[6]

But the problem is not only the intellectual tradition that separates religion from everything else. In addition, that same tradition has produced religion as the dominant term in a series of hierarchically paired oppositions, in which lesser terms include "magic," "superstition," "witchcraft," "the occult," "the supernatural," and "barbaric practices."[7] These categories, like the triad of magic, science, and religion that has structured much anthropological theorizing, have been insurmountably hierarchical, and have produced ethnocentric and conceptually misleading models of religion.[8]

In his important history of the concepts of "religion" and "magic" in West-

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