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Comfa, Obeah, and Emancipation:

Celebrating Guyanese Freedoms While Captive in Cultural Politics

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Culture and Performance

by

Jeremy Jacob Peretz

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Comfa, Obeah, and Emancipation:

Celebrating Guyanese Freedoms While Captive in Cultural Politics

by

Jeremy Jacob Peretz

Master of Arts in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Chair

This thesis examines a singular event commemorating the 1838 emancipation of enslaved Africans in Georgetown, Guyana. When slavery was abolished in the British Empire it had rippling effects throughout the rest of the slave-holding world, as well as within the politics of cultural self-determination and representation for those newly “freed” yet still colonized people. One change that occurred was the re-evaluation and interpretations of *Obeah*, a wide-ranging complex of knowledge and practices utilized for harnessing empowerment to effect changes in people’s social, “spiritual,” and bodily well-being. Prior to emancipation colonial authorities considered Obeah as a malignant tactic of rebellion, and even revolution, requiring vigilant action to suppress. Directly post-emancipation colonial policies aimed more at controlling Obeah as a cultural form epitomizing a Euro-American-imagined “Africa,” one deemed culturally and intellectually “backwards” and in need of “Christian civilizing.” For these combined reasons, and others, Obeah was outlawed and popularly demonized throughout Anglo-Caribbean societies, leaving an ambivalent legacy to follow for those who continue to utilize it, and similar ritual practices, today. A 2014 Libation Ceremony in Georgetown honoring the 1838 emancipation

featured a constellation of sensory and performative atmospheres that invoked an aura and memory of “Africa” and African identity, including the use of varying ritual practices associated with Obeah. Analyzing vernacular speech acts and other performance features of audience/participants during this ceremonial night reveals conflicting and often ambiguous understandings of Obeah’s connections to cultural politics. Primarily framed through local and contemporary politics of national and religious identity construction, this study also engages cultural politics of transnational global significance, and through historically informed perspective.

The thesis of Jeremy Jacob Peretz is approved.

Lauren Robin Derby

Mary Nooter Roberts

Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

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Part I

Commemorating National Histories While Performing Culture as Politics

In Georgetown, Guyana on the night of July 31, 2014, hundreds of people decked out in their finest “African” fashions, colorful wardrobes and fanciful adornments, were making their ways to the main downtown market. It was the night before Emancipation Day, Guyana’s national holiday and cultural festival marking Britain’s 1838 abolition of slavery in its colonies. The streets were abuzz with friends and families walking and gathering together, many in matching fabrics. Smells of frying sweets and other savory treats filled the air, as did the loud chatter of voices, as well as the thump of drums and patter of shakers. People gathered there at the market-grounds early in the evening for an initial set of ritual proceedings before being formed into massive parade lines by the presiding master of ceremonies, Bishop of the local *Comfa* church. Once properly prepared for the march, the two distinct lines wove through the city together in dance, song, prayer, and community reflection and speculation. The lead line consisted of a privileged group of Comfa insiders and Surinamese Maroon performers (see image 1), while the other line was made up of everyone else.

After surging their way a few miles down some of Georgetown’s broad avenues, past City Hall and the Parliament building, the two parade lines arrived at an open public plaza, the Square of the Revolution. People gathered at the center of the square under the massive presence of the 1763 Monument, a towering thirty-three-foot high, muscular full-body bronze statue of an individual said to symbolize the spirit of Cuffy (see images 2 and 3). Cuffy,¹ Guyana’s National Hero, is remembered for leading a year-long revolution against Guyana’s then Dutch colonizers.

¹ Although it does seem strange for a figure of such prominence, I have yet to locate a surname attached to this “Cuffy” in any historical records. The name Cuffy, also spelled as Kofi, is an example of an Akan “day name,” an

Due to these revolutionary achievements, Cuffy's memory plays a central role in commemorating Emancipation in Guyana, and is referenced as reason for holding this pre-Emancipation libation ceremony in his presence.

But Cuffy and Comfa Bishop Irving were not the only figures of authority reigning over these ritual remembrances and celebrations of Emancipation. The Comfa Bishop was ritually assisted by a set of four *orisha*, or Yoruba divinities, who manifested physically in the bodies of Comfa practitioners who were present (see images 4 and 5). These orisha, *Eshu*, *Shango*, *Oshun*, and *Yemaya*, helped direct the ritual performances and interacted with the audience in varying ways, like making room for small children or moving rowdy observers further back. As clusters of people from both parade lines crammed in tightly around the base of Cuffy's statue, where an elaborate altar of various items had been constructed by the orisha and Bishop, members of the lead line secured positions closest around the altar and ritual action (see images 6 and 7). After the group assembled, many singing hymns together, the Bishop spoke and addressed the audience in prayer.

Shortly after, two people of high political prominence made their way into the ritual inner circle and were placed in central positions between Bishop Irving and the orisha. Eshu then handed the two politicians white sacrificial doves, which each man grasped in his hands as the crowd hushed and the Bishop began to speak (see images 8 and 9). This scene caused many members of the audience to begin questioning what was to follow. An electric-like buzz vibrated throughout as speculation and rumor seemed to be spreading in all possible directions, both in space and in peoples' ideas about what these politicians would do with these ritual offerings. At one point a spectator grew so troubled by what he envisioned to be the birds' prospects he yelled

out “They’ve gone too far, they’re gonna kill the doves!”² Another person present in the crowd responded to these concerns by affirming the cultural significance and even authenticity of such an act of sacrifice, stating “They’re gonna make a *real* African thing of this!” While ritual offerings of doves seemed over the line for at least one person present, the same practice presented a source of group cultural pride and an example of emancipatory freewill in practice. Responding to the claim of an authentic “African thing,” a black Guyanese woman of mid-age who was actively engaged with the inner circle added, “Yeah we gotta do our own thing too, right? It’s our freedom.”

As the crowd’s enthusiasm spiked, all eyes on the men with the birds, a ritual climax was nearing. Silence fell over the crowd as Bishop Irving repeated a collective thanks to the ancestors for freedoms hard fought, before instructing the politicians to release their birds. As Guyana’s Prime Minister and Chairman of the main opposition party each let their white pigeons fly off freely and majestically from their grasps, the crowd erupted with shouts of “Freedom!” and “*Kumbaya!*,”³ “Amen!” and “*Ashe!*”⁴ Explosions of drumming, dance, and singing ignited all

² Throughout this paper I have translated and transliterated Guyanese language (sometimes called *Creolese*), when used by my interlocutors, into standard or “vernacular” English when quoting their statements directly.

³ *Kumbaya*, the name of a popular US “folk-revival” song of the 1960s, has origins of which many readers may be unaware. Popularized in the late 1950s, through to the 1990s as a children’s “camp song,” it was recorded by hundreds of artists around the world. Folklorists and musicologists have long-thought the first recording of the song to be from 1958, by the Ohio-based musical group, The Folksmiths, titled “Kum Ba Yah (Come By Here)” (Winick 2010: 3). In the liner notes to their release, The Folksmiths share their version of the song’s origins: “This is a song from the West coast of southern Africa...One version appears in print in several pocket songbooks of the Cooperative Recreation Service of Delaware, Ohio and is Copy- righted by them. They collected it from a professor at Baldwin Wallace College in Ohio, who heard it from a missionary in Angola, Africa” (Folkways Records 1958). Prior to the folk-revival recordings however, “Come By Here” was a widely sung spiritual know by African Americans in the US South. The American Folklife Center Archive at the Library of Congress’s earliest recording of the song comes from a North Carolina high school student named Minnie Lee, whose school principal recorded it in 1926, and sent it off to the archive’s founder the following year (Winick 2010: 4). Although a White New York-based evangelist, Marvin Frey, published a version of the song in 1939 which he copyrighted as his own creation, evidence of the song’s usage among Gullah-speakers in the Sea Islands and coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida, shows earlier uses among African descended people. This African American origin is likely a reason why Guyanese used the term in celebrating their African ancestors’ Emancipation.

around and conversations grew to shouts as the crowd began dispersing from its tight mass surrounding Cuffy.

Remembering Histories through Performance

Scholars have devoted much attention to Emancipation freedom festivals of the past, in particular during the first few decades following the 1834 Act of abolition. But how are contemporary Emancipation celebrations “*memory performances*” opposed to *historical ones*? And what does this mean for their utility as agents of social and political mobilization? Should current August First Day celebrations be seen as just that, mere commemoration of events passed, or as active activism and demonstrations, or even remonstrations, to generate desired changes? What role does internationalism play in these contemporary events and how can relationships between—and within nations—be understood in terms of how such events unfold?

Others researching historical perspectives on Emancipation celebrations in the Caribbean and US have acknowledged that “while scholars recognize the importance of West India Day, there has been little systematic analysis of its participants, social forms, and political significance” (Kerr-Ritchie 2007: 5). This paper attempts to explore these gaps with a close analysis of a pre-Emancipation Day public Libation Ceremony that took place in Georgetown, Guyana, on the night of July thirty-first, 2014. Examining participants individually and within groups, as well as the roles they performed and positions they expressed throughout the

⁴ *Ashe* is a Yoruba word and concept that Robert Farris Thompson has rightfully called “untranslatable” (1983: 9). Thompson tells us of that within Yoruba cosmology, the orisha, or “various spirits under God...are messengers and embodiments of *ashe*, spiritual command, the power-to-make-things-happen” (ibid.: 5). As “divine force incarnate,” *Ashe* also “literally means ‘So be it,’ [or] ‘May it happen’” (ibid.: 7), and so is used as a call-and-response participatory vocal agreement within Yoruba (and increasingly other African diaspora) ritual contexts (Clarke 2004: 218).

ceremony will provide insights into more than just this one event. Certain practices and affiliations these celebrating groups held reveal political, cultural, and other motivations and aspirations underlying their participation in commemorating this historic occurrence.

Commemorative events such as Emancipation Day have been explored through the frame of memory performance, and any such instance can be described as *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory. Although such memorable occasions may represent a particular unchanging moment of the past, in their re-remembrance and re-performance through commemoration these experiences can be altered and re-interpreted contingent upon contemporary circumstances or needs. Far from being a passive storage system, *performed* “memory is a dynamic social process of recuperation, reconfiguration, and outright invention” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 17; cf. Apter and Derby 2010). Through narrating, and at times through ritual embodying these Guyanese histories of Emancipation and related social processes, new or alternate interpretations and meanings surrounding those events may be generated and employed in understanding and confronting similar social issues today.

In celebrations that took place soon after formal Emancipation on August first, 1834, sites of memory must have served as powerful reminders of what other enslaved people in the hemisphere were still confronting. In the US and other places, millions of enslaved people were still working plantations while their British Caribbean counterparts had won their freedom. This surely led both unbound and enslaved people to ponder the politics of freedom itself. So unlike *histories*, which recall past occurrences and commemorate or remember them within static temporal timelines defined by power such as a state, an August First Day celebration can also work as a lieu de memoire (Nora 1989: 7-9). Through being performed by actual people within this given context, the Emancipation celebration—as site of memory—can be elastically

envisioned and interpreted by individuals in socially and politically meaningful ways for their specific needs. Formerly enslaved British Caribbean residents could use their freedom festivals not only to celebrate their own new-found freedom, but to envision and actively work towards emancipation for their sisters and brothers still in bondage in the US, Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere. Contemporary commemorative practices also work towards or represent similarly collective political and social goals.

Employing a performance and event-based approach will prove valuable for this study. Ceremonies, as performance events, allow for elaborate contexts, situations, and relationships to be explored in depth while also broadly branching out to many disparate areas of interest surrounding these singular occurrences. Issues of politics, nationalism, *post*coloniality, “ethnic” and religious identity boundaries, and many more are all intermeshed in this one event, providing an opportunity for those present to engage with defining and negotiating significant interrelationships between societal struggles. Viewed as a performance event it is easier to see how, as Adorno puts it, “just as no earlier experience is real...nothing past is proof and what endures historically is not lived experience but its residues, its byproducts, its sediments. [C]onversely, no memory is guaranteed, existent in itself, indifferent to the future of him [sic] who harbours it” (1978: 166; quoted in Jackson 2005: 14). Using Arendt’s observation, Jackson further argues that “action...acts in a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes” (1958: 190; in Jackson 2005: 14). Events and actions must be analyzed in terms of histories/pasts/memories and future consequences, and most important perhaps, who is doing the remembering/acting/predicting (and from which perspectives), and who is living with the consequences of such actions. Each annual

commemoration brings up new ideas and possibilities, or at least revisits old ones in new ways in light of current demands and requirements.

Individuals' and groups' motivations for attending and performing as part of Georgetown's 2014 Emancipation March and Libation Ceremony were no doubt diverse and represented an array of political, religious, national, and "ethnic" affiliations. People and groups had different reasons for participating, and they chose to commemorate and re-live particular *histories* for various purposes, often with major significance for current concerns, such as political or cultural struggles. As we will see, some attendees used opportunities provided by the historical event to do *memory-work* as a means of enacting forms of agency, praxis, and cultural control, delineating group boundaries and group interests based on interpretations of past events and their relations to contemporary ones. Who is in which group, and what those groups "contributed" (or did not contribute) to the colony or republic, especially in colonial and independence struggles, are major concerns confronted by those participating in this Emancipation commemoration through their performances, or through their mere presences. Just how to *be* a member of any said group is also significant here, for actors must play the part to be considered "authentic" in-group comrades and the part one plays is being "read" and evaluated by other "performer-spectators."

Although we can attempt to understand some of the complexities of this performance event through detailed descriptions and by pursuing lines of actors' *likely* motivations, we can never know what becomes of all these various actors' plans and objectives. We "can never predict the outcome of the events that befall us" or others with whom we work, and we must acknowledge the *irreducibility of events* (Jackson 2005: 14). This suggests, to use Jackson's words, that to appreciate that in analyzing an event ethnographically "we can never trace out all

the antecedent conditions and causes that determined its advent or appearance, and to stress that the meaning of any event is relative to one's point of view" (ibid.). Many divergent and conflicting opinions surround motivations to participate in and evaluations of Georgetown's Emancipation commemorations. Many opinions about others' participation were openly shared, often to the dismay of some. That became part of the performance, an ongoing critical commentary running throughout where attendees could freely voice opinions about the performance and others could just as soon respond. Exploring relationships between various participants/performers will also be important here.

Politics of Commemorating Emancipation Day

In 1834, the centuries-old system of human bondage, transport, and labor was disrupted in the British world when the Abolition of Slavery Bill came into effect on August first. Primary repercussions were felt in the British West Indies (Caribbean), where most of Britain's enslaved subjects worked in plantation labor on private estates. This began a transitional period from unpaid forced labor to a four-year apprenticeship model that led to eventual emancipation and "full freedom" within all British colonies in 1838. When Bridget Brereton observes that "the first Emancipation Day was *truly* celebrated on August 1, 1838" (1994, 31, emphasis added), she is referring to the hostilities resulting from these four years of limbo.

On August first, 1834, some British colonial authorities, including those in British Guiana, attempted to mark the slaves' new status with church ceremonies and other civil and religious recognitions. In some colonies a backlash resulted among those enslaved people who demanded freedom immediately—more years of unpaid work was out of the question. For instance, in St. Kitts these new apprentices refused to work once they caught word that their neighbors in Antigua, governed by the same jurisdiction, would have no period of bonded

apprenticeship. On August first at the announcement of their non-full freedom, a majority of St. Kitts workers began an island-wide strike that lasted over two weeks and was met by imposition of martial law, during which strikers' homes were burnt down and leaders were "banished, whipped and imprisoned" (Brereton 1994: 29). In nearby Trinidad, although no organized mass plantation strikes ensued, the first of August announcement of apprenticeship was met by riots on the streets of Port of Spain (ibid.: 29-30). Hundreds of workers from a French plantation⁵ marched to the Government House chanting "*point de six ans, point de six ans*' (no [more] six years, no [more] six years)," publicly condemning apprenticeship plans and demanding their freedom immediately (Kerr-Ritchie 2007: 27; Rugemer 2011: 320). In other British-controlled islands and territories such as "Barbados, for instance, August 1 1834 was just another working day, with no parades, no official functions, no holiday, not even any special church services" (Brereton 1995: 29), perhaps being intentionally downplayed by colonial authorities for fears that enslaved people might similarly vocalize and mobilize themselves to resist ongoing slavery in the name of apprenticeship.

As for British Guiana⁶ on August first 1834, the governor of the colony declared the day a public holiday, and many churches and missionary groups offered worship services (Rugemer 2011: 320; Ishmael 2013: np. ch 46). There was no initial resistance to official announcements of apprenticeship, perhaps because enslaved workers were unaware of situations in other colonies, but that is unlikely the case. By August fourth, apprentices working in plantations

⁵ The island of Trinidad had been a Spanish colony that attracted many French settler-colonizers from France's Caribbean colonies after their revolution at the turn of the century. This also included many more French colonizers and plantation owners fleeing Saint Domingue during the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, moving their operations to islands like Trinidad. Britain did not take possession of Trinidad until 1802, merely three decades prior to Emancipation.

⁶ The Guyanese government changed the spelling of the country's name at independence in 1966 to the current spelling, "Guyana." When the three separate Dutch colonies of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo were ceded to Britain in 1814, they were officially amalgamated as "British Guiana," although governed under separate administrations.

along Guyana's Essequibo coast refused to complete their assigned tasks (Green 1969: 49), mobilizing collective resistance to slavery's continuation through peacefully withholding their labor. Conflicting views of what this limbo period of Apprenticeship meant for enslaved people's personhood was clear. Learning from fellow enslaved people, as well as missionaries and other colonizers, that "the King had freed them" (St. Pierre 1999: 23), it was clear to these workers that their labors should no longer be forced. Yet to the colonizers and plantation administrators, legal freedom for "apprentices" still required their forced labor to be put to colonial economic expansion (ibid: 22-23). So although these Essequibo workers did not abandon their plantations to organize mass public demonstrations as happened in other colonies that same week, nonetheless British Guianese slave owners and local Justices of the Peace pressed the colonial administration to impose martial law (Green 1969: 49-50), in order to force the apprentices back to work. Hesitant at first, superintendent of apprenticeship, Lieutenant Governor Sir James Carmichael Smyth, understood as "an unflinching champion of the rights and entitlements of the emancipated population" (ibid.: 48), caved to the plantocracy's demands, and went out to the Essequibo coast himself.

Smyth was escorted by local law enforcement to various plantations where workers were striking, and he personally explained to them their new conditions under apprenticeship, which were largely unchanged from the terms of enslavement. Smyth's agenda included forceful assurances to these (formerly) enslaved workers that the legal forty-five-hour workweek would be strictly enforced and adhered to by their managers. We know that in the week following the 1834 Emancipation, workers in neighboring St. Vincent staged a strike at Adelphi Estate contesting their overseer's right to force them to work "beyond the time prescribed by law for their daily labor" (Kerr-Ritchie 2007: 27). Smyth also made clear that consequences for not

returning immediately to work would be forced appearance in court followed by undetermined penalties. Before the situation settled back into work as usual, alleged ringleaders of these so called disturbances were rounded up from the Essequibo coastal region and brought to Georgetown's Supreme Criminal Court, where one was hanged, four were deported from the colony, and thirty-two sentenced to receive floggings, from which Smyth pardoned them in the end (Green 1969: 50). Small strikes and work stoppages were incited here and there in the following months and years, but overall the apprenticeship program carried on slavery as it was for another four years. Not until 1838 did formerly enslaved peoples and those working for their freedom all feel reason to truly celebrate emancipation.

Triumphant celebrations broke out within Caribbean locales where newly freed people commemorated this historic event. As was attempted four years earlier, church, state, and other official recognitions of emancipation, including events at individual plantations, framed the event as a paternalistic act, with slavers and state bestowing freedom upon their subjects through the grace of God and just governance. This allowed for maintaining subpersonhood status (Mills 1998: 110) for the formerly enslaved, who were conceived to require the beneficence of Christendom and Enlightened political philosophy to be freed, as they were unable to free themselves through their own revolutionary political or military struggles, which were long condemned. The sole exemption was those courageous enslaved revolutionaries of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) who did free themselves. Yet to these "Enlightened Christians," the Haitians' self-determined revolutionary emancipation served as stronger justification for maintaining slavery another four years, and subpersonhood indefinitely. Apprenticeship became a way to prevent the formerly enslaved from "sinking into a wild, unchristian and unproductive

barbarism” upon their emancipation, following the proto-evolutionary logic of the moment (Green 1969: 47).

Just as slavery itself was rationalized through slavers’ white supremacist ideologies that viewed Africans and their descendents as incapable of organizing and governing themselves, so too were these ideas used in recognizing new freedom. Church and missionary gatherings became primary sites of emancipation celebrations and commemorations as part of the Christianizing drive to counter what was perceived and feared as African “atavism” that might ensue. Just as important were plantation-based emancipation events where plantation owners framed themselves as the moral bestowers of freedom, throwing lavish feasts and balls for their newly freed workers in attempts to persuade them to maintain their positions working on the estates (Rugemer 2011: 320). Emancipation came in three forms, because if “for the missionaries it was a gift from God; for the colonial authorities it was a gift from the state; and for the planters it was a gift from them [the planters]” (ibid.: 321). Similar ambiguities characterize how Emancipation, or “Abolition,” was framed in the US context in the years following the US Civil War.

Despite hegemonic discourses of the bestowal of freedom by the very forces of enslavement, newly-freed people did celebrate, and resist in their own ways. Edward Rugemer observes that aside from official and religious modes of celebrating August first, folkways such as dance, music, and masquerade street performances were also significant. These forms of performance were among the only modes of celebrating emancipation that persisted as years passed. It was not until the late twentieth century that former and still current British colonies officially marked the day as a holiday. Trinidad and Tobago were the first to do so in 1985, when they officially replaced Discovery Day, commemorating Christopher Columbus’s “discovery,”

with August First Day (ibid.; Anyika nd.: 7). A grassroots historical association in Port of Spain wrote directly to every head of state in the Caribbean asking them to declare the day a national holiday, and between 1996 and 1998 five countries did so, including Guyana (Anyika nd.: 7).

Various folkways of commemorating emancipation are documented in historical materials from 1834 onwards. Nighttime musical street parades or masquerades seem most prevalent in records that describe how after church services in the evening, streets would fill with performance troupes who could then celebrate to their own tunes. This was the case in 1834 Jamaica, where the governor described a scene of “unusually noisy” “John Cause Men” who danced and drummed all through the streets of town in their “outlandish” dress (quoted in Rugemer 2011: 314-5). These groups of Jamaican street performers are called “John Canoe” or Jonkonnu, and usually appeared on Jamaican streets around Christmas-time, as they still do in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean (Bettelheim 1988: 39). In Jamaica and other nearby colonies, Christmas was a precarious time of year for slave-owners, as rebellion always seemed close at hand. When Jamaican plantation administrators saw Jonkonnu troupes months before Christmas, and given the tenuous circumstances of anticipated apprenticeship, they feared unrest was inevitable (Rugemer 2011: 314-5). Jonkonnu performers and their communities were celebrating their emancipation through their performances in a way they preferred. In accounts from Barbados, drum, dance, and costume were similarly recorded as self-chosen means for formerly enslaved people to celebrate. “Joan and Johnny” dance circles, including drums and rattles, are a frequently mentioned example (Brereton 1995: 32). “Joan and Johnny” is a type of ring dance, more widely referred to as *Calenda*, and is considered one of the most popular and influential African-inflected dance styles to be maintained in the Americas, perhaps contributing to the foundations of tap dance (Knowles 2002: 29).

Aside from locally oriented folk celebrations such as public street performances, some communities recognized this self-determined struggle for freedom as ever-ongoing and international in scope. Festivities characterized more as awareness-raising campaigns were developed throughout the Americas and Europe in efforts to abolish slavery in other European colonies and former colonies like the US, Cuba, and Brazil, where trade in enslaved peoples continued to increase due primarily to US-led entrepreneurship (Kerr-Ritchie 2007).

As time passed, participation in public Emancipation Day celebrations and activism events waxed and waned, although they maintained statuses of exceptional significance to people of African descent throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world. In the US context this tradition has been characterized as an alternative Fourth of July (Quarles 1969: 116-141). African Americans could acknowledge and celebrate their freedom struggles, not with the US against the British, but more accurately with the British against US plantocratic interests (Blackett 1983). Scholars have explored how these annual “freedom festivals” in their early manifestations (1830’s-1850’s) served as tools for critiquing ongoing US and non-British European continuation of commerce in enslaved persons (Kachun 2003; Kerr-Ritchie 2007; Rugemer 2008; Wiggins 1987). Where Anglo-Americans celebrated their own freedom from British rule through independence celebrations in this period, as they do today, there was no new freedom gained for African Americans as a result of US independence from Britain. Many people of African descent living in the new US post-independence viewed this revolution as a defeat because British political opinions at that time were inclined toward abolition as represented by the *Somerset v Stewart* case in 1772, which recognized slavery as unlawful within England and Wales, but did not apply to the rest of the Empire. Some scholars question the overwhelmingly positive “master-narrative” of the US “revolution” and have reinterpreted it as a “counter-revolution,” with US

economic (plantation) interests countering the revolutionary anti-slavery and abolitionist movements in 1770s Britain, and their colonies (Horne 2014). These anti-slavery movements were led by both Black and White free people, as well as—importantly and usually with more revolutionary aims—by enslaved people themselves.

Explorations of African American national identity building in the US have often focused too narrowly on simultaneously developing US nationalism. Arguments have been put forward claiming that Black US national identity has only been molded using the tools and methods of US nationalism in general. This view overlooks key elements of Black internationalism, such as Emancipation celebrations that played significant roles in “construction of African American historical consciousness and in the establishment of African American commemorative traditions” (Kachun 2003: 55-6). African enslavement was by no means confined nationally, nor was abolition or commemorations honoring abolition. Interconnections among people remembering slavery’s end were clear in a 2014 Emancipation Day celebration I witnessed, when international ties and cross-cultural currents were recognized and celebrated alongside lingering hegemonic British, US, and other colonial ghosts (Williams 1991: 219-25; 251-72).

Part II

Preparing to March

On the evening prior to Guyana’s national August First Emancipation Day holiday, many Georgetown residents made their way downtown for the festivities. The Emancipation march was to leave Stabroek⁷ Market grounds, the city’s main commercial and transportation hub,

⁷ Stabroek Market’s name comes from the capital city’s former Dutch appellation. The Dutch colonial administration for these colonies was originally housed in an area at a distance from what is now Georgetown. It was French settlers who first made their capital in what is now downtown Georgetown around 1782, calling it Longchamps. After the Dutch regained control of the Guyana colonies in 1874, they moved their capital to where the French had established theirs, renaming it Stabroek in honor of the then President of the Dutch West India

around nine pm. But by eight o'clock crowds of colorfully dressed people, many in bright wax-print fabrics, had gathered in anticipation of the night's excitement. In fact for days prior to August first many vendors around town had been selling African-style wares, clothing and accessories; and many Guyanese—from young to old, African- to Indian-descended people—were sporting them. There was even a branch of an international bank whose employees were all wearing similar African outfits leading up to the national holiday, including traditional head coverings for women tellers.

Indian Guyanese descend from indentured laborers brought to colonial British Guiana from various parts of South Asia, mainly present-day India. Indentured laborers were brought to Guyana under British contracts beginning directly after apprenticeship, and continuing until 1917. Today Indian descended Guyanese make up a slight majority of the population. African descended Guyanese comprise roughly one-third and Amerindian Indigenous Guyanese approximately ten percent, and the rest are “mixed.”⁸ Although many Indian Guyanese

Company, Nicolaas Geelvinck, Lord of Stabroek, a region of present-day Belgian Antwerp. The city remained Stabroek and expanded under Dutch rule to encompass a wide area. In 1812 the British retook the colonies and renamed their new capital Georgetown, after King George III (Lea, Milward and Rowe 2001: 123; Smith 1962: 19-20).

⁸ The terminology “mixed” comes from Guyana’s census, although Dougla is a more commonly used term. Dougla derives from Bhojpuri and Hindi language words that mean “half-neck” or “half-caste,” derogatorily denoting a “break” with familial caste strictures within Hindu society. In Guyana usage of the term is not offensive, and many people self-identified themselves to me as “Dougla” (see image 10). Scholarship on Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and other southeastern Caribbean locales, has worked to theorize Indian/African contacts and resulting “intercultures” through an understanding of “Dougla poetics.” As a way of bringing long-overdue attention to “horizontal” intercultural contacts between colonized peoples, theorizing “Dougla poetics” moves beyond “creole theories” which have been said to disproportionately represent European- and African-derived influences. “Dougla poetics” shares overlapping features with similarly emerging theories of “Coolitude,” which conceptualizes the global diaspora of indentured South Asian laborers, and which frames Indian/African “creole interculture” as “an encounter, an exchange of histories, of poetics or visions of the world, between those of African and Indian descent, without excluding other sources” (Carter and Tourabully 2002: 150). While both theories are valuable in re-thinking the long-stale “creole” metaphors, the theories also both tend towards overly utopian analyses of “hybridity in equality” that may overshadow dynamics of power in the guise of “horizontal” relations. For more on “Dougla poetics,” see Shalini Puri (2004), who first coined the term. For other useful sources on “Dougla poetics” see England 2008; Hernandez-Ramdwar 1997; Job 1987; Mehta 2004; Rahim 2010; Reddock 1994 and 1999; and Regis 2011. On “Coolitude” see Carter and Tourabully 2002.

participate in recognizing Emancipation, that their ancestors were *brought* to Guyana through this same event being commemorated is not forgotten.

People arrived early to witness and participate in a religious ceremony at the market prior to the march's commencement. A large circular throng of spectators hummed around a group of people at the center of the activity. Three or four men seemed in control as activity centered around their words, actions, and manipulations of certain ritual objects. Included were lit candles, cigars, potted plants, books, basins of water, and other liquid-filled containers. While some spectators strained to watch and listen to the proceedings, many others simply *limed*⁹ (chatted, hung-out), drank beers, ate, and paid little mind to the ritualizing underway nearby. This ambivalence between participants' nonchalant demeanors and serious attention to solemn, somber introspection and attention inspired by the central figures was striking, and would remain a subject of contention throughout the remainder of the night.

Those most closely surrounding the ritual action comprised a sort of inner circle of mostly Black multi-generational families, roughly twenty to thirty people in all. In this group almost everyone wore African print clothing and many had on beaded necklaces, hats, belts, and carried other accessories like flywhisks, staffs, and drums. These were the core participants, being the ones who carried the few hymns and other songs sung at the market prior to marching. This group of people were also the primary participants interacting with and assisting the

⁹ The Guyanese language verb *lime* is widely used by most all Guyanese, so I have included the term throughout this paper in describing Guyanese people's behavior that I observed. Similar to popular terms used in the US, like "hang," "chill," or "kick-it," the Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage defines "to lime" as "to sit, loaf or hang about with others usu[ally] on the sidewalk or other open place, chatting aimlessly, watching passers-by and sometimes making unsolicited remarks to them" (Allsopp 1996: 348). Or as a noun, "lime" can mean "an unorganized social gathering (usu[ally] of young people)...sometimes qualified by the name of the place or the purpose of the lime, [such as] a beach lime [meaning] 'a gathering at the beach'" (ibid.: 349). The location of public space as the site of liming is significant, especially in regards to analyzing public speech acts of those present at Emancipation.

religious leaders in their ritual administrations to begin this ceremony leading to the march and later libation pourings.

One religious elder, Bishop Andrew Irving, stood out as the orchestrator of activity. He could be seen giving instructions to various other leaders who served as his assistants. Three of these assistants seemed most attentive to Bishop Irving's needs, dotting on him and offering any help required. These three assisting helpers, one woman and two men, did not have on the same bright wax-print fabric most other spectators wore, but instead had their own special regalia. They were fitted in royal outfits corresponding to particular orisha (deities of Yoruba origin), which they personified, or more accurately, who manifest materially through the helpers' physical bodily presence (Brown 1993: 48-9). Made of lavish red and white, and red and black satin-looking garments, detailed with elaborate fringes and other ornamentations, with additions of stylized cowrie-studded hats, beaded necklaces, and accessories like canes, staffs, or flywhisks, these accouterments do more than clothe and look nice. Dress and other symbolic objects are associated with particular orisha through their features such as colors or materials of construction. Through donning such ritual paraphernalia, assistants can "manifest"¹⁰ the orisha within themselves. Writing about initiation ceremonies within *Santeria*, a Cuban form of Yoruba-inflected religion, Ysamur Flores-Peña states that the "initiate wears the symbols of the orisha and becomes the living representation of the deity" (1990: 47). In this way "the consecration outfit creates the orisha in the body of the initiate" (ibid.; also quoted in Brown 1993: 49), transforming these "helpers" into orisha-helpers, come to assist the Bishop in his empowering undertakings for the community. The orisha brought with them a particular

¹⁰ In Guyana and other parts of the Caribbean the verb "manifest" is used to refer to what scholars have termed "spirit possession" or "mediumship." In Guyana the verb "catch" is also used, as in to "catch spirit" or "catch Comfa" (discussed below).

atmosphere and *subjunctive mood* conducive to the empowering work at hand, but also carried in contention and conflict with the perspectives of some participants present.

Many had come to witness and partake in a commemoration of Emancipation and a spiritual service to honor ancestors who lived through those trying times. But the ways to thank and honor the ancestors and the ways that the events are remembered are not the same for all Guyanese, and these differences became obvious as the night's activities progressed. Some participants were compelled to honor their ancestors through trance and "spirit mediumship," to the horror and revulsion of others. Still some people chose to view this night as all about political positionings, whereby religion, "ethnicity" and politics were all lumped together in an undifferentiable tangle. Ways in which people there chose to interpret the night's gatherings in how they openly talked about others' "performances" at the event provide insight into various insider perspectives and ways-of-being in the festivities. Exploring language and other features of performances of those present that night—how they spoke about and related to the night's activities and others present—provides broader insights into Guyanese politics of cultural struggle.

Comfa or Not? Moving Through the Streets Together

"Liming" and waiting in eager anticipation behind this central clustered gathering were hundreds of other people, young and old, all readying themselves for the parade's departure. As the inner circle began to disperse at the conclusion of opening rituals, Bishop Irving and his helpers began organizing the crowds into distinct lines in preparation for the march. Two lines of people snaked through the bustling glow of taxicab and minibus headlights packed into the open square in front of Stabroek Market. This massive public square was once the main auction

grounds for purchasing and selling enslaved Africans prior to Emancipation, a historical fact not lost on many present that night and the reason Bishop Irving gave for beginning the march there.

One line, the one to move in front, consisted of those families from the inner circle joined in rank by a large contingent of Surinamese nationals dressed in traditional Maroon *pangis* and other recognizably “African” attire. Bishop Irving went up and down this first line inspecting to see that the correct people had indeed made it into the line and they were fitted appropriately for the occasion. One woman in line was asked to cover her shoulder where a tattooed marijuana leaf stood out, and another was asked to find a less revealing top as to “not upset the ancestors.” All remaining people who were not associated with this religious in-group, later identified as Comfa practitioners, were corralled into the “other” general group of marchers.

Comfa is often equated with Obeah in popular thought, although far fewer people openly identify as practitioners of Obeah, unlike Comfa, of which more are proud to be participants. Perhaps this comes from years of stigma directed towards Obeah, or because of Comfa’s relationship to more “orthodox” forms of religion under colonial rule, particularly Christianity. Comfa derives from the Twi (part of the Akan language family of West Africa) word *o’komfo*, meaning priest, diviner, or ritual specialist, although other less-neutral definitions abound (Asantewa 2009: 6; Gibson 2001: 1; Hanserd 2011: 1).¹¹ In earlier Guyanese histories Comfa was most generally associated with ritual dances and drumming intended to bring about “spirit possession,” or enable those willing to “*ketch Comfa*”¹² (Asantewa 2009: 6). Early archival and published materials suggest these ritual dances labeled Comfa were associated with practices

¹¹ Other definitions given for *o’komfo* include “fetish-man, possessed with or prophesying by a fetish” or one who “pretends to be the interpreter and mouthpiece...of...spirit” (Allsopp 1996: 165, quoting Christaller 1933 [1881]).

¹² Guyanese orthography follows the International Phonetic Alphabet in using the letter “k” for the “voiceless velar sound, for which English uses letters “k” and “c” often interchangeably. Asantewa’s “k” in “*ketch Comfa*” likely comes from this official Guyanese orthography, whereas the “C” used in “*Comfa*” reflects the popular spelling of the concept and religion of Comfa.

devoted to *Watermamma*,¹³ a spirit of water, of which Guyana is abundant, the word Guyana deriving from an Amerindian one meaning “land of many waters” (Duff 1866: 36; Lee Kong and Dikland 2004; Gibson 2001: 1). Evidence shows that Watermamma rituals played a significant role in the lives of formerly enslaved people in the years following emancipation, when social and cultural organizations were established specifically for devotion to Watermamma (Moore 1995: 138). Brian Moore suggests that Comfa consisted of “[t]he most popular religious rituals of West African origin,” and that “in Guyana the ritual was also referred to as *Watermamma*...in honor of the river gods” (ibid.).

These earlier devotional social associations persisted, but over time through a process of increased missionization in Guyana after emancipation (Smith 1976: 319-21), church teachings and structures were incorporated—or creolized—into Comfa practices (Gibson 2001: 55). Other religious movements sprouting up around the Caribbean about the same time may have also contributed to Comfa’s early development. Some time in the early 1880s, conversations between two workers in Trinidad led to a new movement whose practitioners called themselves *Faithists*,

¹³ *Mami Wata*, which can be compared with Watermamma in Guyana, and *Watra Mama* in Suriname, has been thoroughly studied by African and African diaspora arts scholar Henry Drewal. Drewal organized a major exhibition dedicated to Mami Wata and devotional arts associated with her and other African and African diaspora water spirits in 2008 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. In the introductory chapter to his catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Drewal tells us that “Mami Wata, often portrayed with the head and torso of a woman and the tail of a fish, is at once beautiful, jealous, generous, seductive, and potentially deadly” (2008: 23). As “a water spirit widely know across Africa and the African Diaspora,” Mami Wata is a “powerful and pervasive presence [who] can bring good fortune in the form of money...[A]s a ‘capitalist’ par excellence, her power increased between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries, the era of growing international trade between Africa and the rest of the world” (ibid.). Representing both potential opportunities and unpredictable and often fatal dangers associated with international colonial and capitalist expansion, Mami Wata is closely connected to the trans-Atlantic slave “trade.” “Countless millions of Africans who were torn from their homeland and forcibly carried across the Atlantic... as part of this ‘trade’ brought with them their beliefs and practices honoring Mami Wata and other ancestral dieties. They reestablished, revisualized, and revitalized these spirits and deities, who often assumed new guises: Lasiren, *Watra Mama*, Maman de l’Eau, or Mae d’Agua. Subsequently, these faiths flourished. Worshippers of Mami Wata and other water divinities have typically selected local as well as global images, arts, ideas, and actions; interpreted the according to indigenous precepts; invested them with new meanings; and then re-presented them in novel and dynamic ways to serve their own specific aesthetic, devotional, social, economic, and political aspirations” (ibid.: 25 [emphasis added]). Relationships and transformations between Watermamma devotion and Comfa in Guyana have yet to receive considerable scholarly attention. That the role of water is still a significant feature in Comfa ritual, as well as other factors, supports the idea that tracing these historical genealogies of Comfa and Watermamma in Guyana remain promising areas for further investigation.

not dissimilar to the Spiritual Baptists of Trinidad and neighboring islands (Gibson 2001: 56; Houk 1995: 71-5). Bhagwan Das, a laborer of South Asian descent was one of these collaborators, the other being Joseph MacLaren from Grenada (Gibson 2001: 56). In 1895 MacLaren went to Guyana where he propagated this new Faithist religion, under the title of The Church of the West Evangelical Millennium Pilgrims (ibid.). In 1917 a Guyanese man named Nathaniel Jordan joined the Faithists. Jordan proved so influential within the group that by the time of his death in 1928 practitioners were referring to themselves as *Jordanites*, carrying a further river reference, as well. Despite being somewhat unwelcome by practitioners themselves, the name White-Robed Army, used prior to Jordan, remained in use and is still familiar to contemporary Guyanese (ibid.).

Today in Guyana a Faithist/Jordanite church following remains, although most Guyanese seem to use the terms Comfa and Faithist (or Spiritualist) interchangeably in my experiences. As evidenced by the orisha present among the Comfa rituals at Emancipation and the use of terms such as Babalawo within Comfa circles, Yoruba-based orisha veneration and Ifa divination are also incorporated within the scope of Comfa practice in Guyana. Kean Gibson, the only scholar to have written a monograph devoted to Comfa,¹⁴ states that “some participants at Comfa ceremonies attend one of the various Christian Churches, whereas some attend the Faithist church. Likewise, most obeah practitioners are Bishops, Elders and Mothers of Faithist churches, but others operate independently and do not attend any kind of church” (2001: 56). This ecclesiastical structure that characterizes Faithist practice, including use of a church space, hierarchical organization with titles like “Bishop,” and use of the Holy Bible and other Christian

¹⁴ Asantewa’s 2009 doctoral thesis also exists.

theological tenets, seems to differentiate Comfa from Obeah, which has no overall structural associations with the Christian church.

Diverging from a view that forced missionization and forceful Christian proselytization largely account for the prominence of Church-like structures and other features in Comfa and earlier Faithist and Jordanite religions, these movements may have intentionally adopted such features not only in sincere faith, but also as tactics in gaining legitimacy for their practices. Paul Christopher Johnson identifies three paths by which “African diaspora religious groups” attempt to “gain legal legitimacy in modern nation-states of the Americas” (2005: 79). “Simulation” describes how African diaspora religions appeal to State laws that protect freedom of religion, by proving their group constitutes a “religion” according to state definitions. In practice this may include “becoming an institutional ‘church’—with specialized buildings, public education programmes, a museum and a regularly gathering congregation—and thereby imitating the [national] model of what a church ‘should be’” (ibid.: 82). In many ways it seems as though in Guyana, Comfa (and its predecessors) benefitted in the legal sphere through its church-like qualities. Obeah, on the other hand, lacking these necessary features to fit state-defined categories of religion, seemed doomed to remain stigmatized and *illegal* (as it remains).

Another of Johnson’s paths involves what he terms “seduction...whereby the State comes to view the tradition in question as its authentic territorial predecessor and symbolic ‘mother’ of the nation” (ibid.). Perhaps this path has been more navigable for Obeah in its national histories, or at least possibly seemed more appealing to the Guyanese State at certain points, whose leader from 1964-1985 was a practitioner of both Comfa and Obeah, and who actively constructed associations between his ritual practices of “religion” and “politics.” This intricate and

intentional performative interplay between rituals of politics and of religion was a conspicuous element of commemorating Emancipation in Georgetown that last night of July.

Soon after organizing into those two opposing parade lines—one Comfa practitioners and Suriname Maroons, the other made up of everyone else—a set of pickup trucks stocked with drummers in their beds took off to lead the parade through the streets of Georgetown (see image 11). With the Comfa/Orisha and Surinamese Maroon contingent leading the way, Maroon dancers and musicians erupted into ecstatic spinning, twirling, and spitfire drum bursts. This prompted the “other” line’s members to break out in cheers of admiration for the Maroon¹⁵ performers and some began to mimic their movements, producing an uproar of laughter among the group. Performing hierarchies and power relations in action, the dual line arrangement seemed also to be conducive of an actor/audience setup, whereby one line was specifically *performing* for the other. Bishop Irving’s line moved much more formally and sang, clapped, and hummed hymns and other “African folk songs” in unison as they marched. Many people in both lines limed as they walked, continuing to drink beer, talk, dance, sing, and be merry all together. The parade went on for well over an hour before reaching its destination, the 1763 Monument, said to depict Cuffy, an enslaved Akan (a culture of present-day Ghana) man who worked as a

¹⁵ Although Maroon groups from Suriname have come to Guyana for the last few years to participate in Emancipation, I am still unclear as to the exactly circumstances through which these relationships came about. Further research into these transnational connections is needed. There certainly are strong connections between Surinamese Maroon resistance struggles and those led by Cuffy during the same period in Guyana, whose figure dominates the area in which the Emancipation march culminates. Attention to the Surinamese Maroons’ presence within Georgetown’s commemoration may provide narrative, conceptual, and performative links between these communities, particularly the Comfa group organizing the annual proceedings. This example of the Maroons’ centrality to the event is also fascinating in its seeming reversal of social statuses based on place. Within Suriname, people from all of six Maroon groups, which today total around 65,000 individuals, face ongoing stigmatization and discrimination, including very recent genocidal civil wars inflicted on them. So the question is: How does this border-crossing Maroon performance troupe’s mobility provide them such esteemed status in their neighbors’ national event? Perhaps playing on these narrative analogies—or even direct historical convergences—between emancipatory struggles that were in the past not artificially segregated by national borders, is a crucial significance of the Maroons’ participation in Georgetown’s event.

cooper before leading a nearly year-long revolution against Dutch colonizers in what is now Berbice, eastern Guyana (Schuler 2005: 376-81; Thompson 2009: 87).

Some Past Obeah Politics

Cuffy and the 1763 uprising he led hold particularly powerful places in Guyanese histories and historical imaginations (Williams 1990). Many factual details surrounding events in Cuffy's life are still questioned by scholars and interested Guyanese alike. These details includes the heroic acts of self-freed Africans under Cuffy's direction who for eleven months installed and defended their own revolutionary government in the colony, and proposed to their Dutch counter-revolutionaries a "two-state solution" of disengagement (Thompson 2009: 77; Nehusi personal communication 2015). Cuffy is today considered by most a symbol of Guyanese struggles for self-determination, freedom, and humanity, and for this he was named the republic's first National Hero in 1970 by Forbes Burnham, Guyana's first president of African heritage. The idea for the statue was envisioned by famed late Guyanese poet, painter, and archaeologist Denis Williams in his role as Director of Art in the Department of Culture within President Burnham's administration (Greaves 2010: 180). Williams sees in Cuffy's monument a memorializing of African ancestors, "the spirit of intelligence, defiance and resolution" ("1763 Monument: Cuffy" 2013). Cuffy, as the people personified, became a topic of discussion at the monument site on the night before Emancipation Day as those present debated aspects of his character and particular methods he utilized in launching his revolution. Some viewed gathering at this site significant and pertinent to the events being honored while others spoke out about a perceived *conspiracy* of Black nationalist politics, conflated with "witchcraft" and "other evils." Cuffy's supposed role as an "Obeahman" or "African witchdoctor," which is said to have aided

in his rebellious activities, surely added to this contention, as did other circumstances of the night's gatherings that we will consider shortly.

Whether ritual practitioner or not, Cuffy is *remembered* by some to play this role, adding to associations between Obeah, and other African-inflected religious practices such as Comfa/Orisha perhaps, and political authority (Genovese 1979: 28). This conflation of spiritual and political power is an indigenous aspect of Yoruba orisha-based and other African derived religions, where priests may simultaneously hold royal civic roles due to their religious statuses (Brown 1993: 54-5; Apter 1992: 71-75, 103-5; Genovese 1979: 28). There are many other examples of African-derived or creolized systems of marking black royalty or civil-political prowess in the (so called) New World, which often simultaneously signaled religious authority or "church leadership" positions.¹⁶ In exploring Obeah's relationships to political control and power one must consider the specific contexts in which it is being practiced, or imagined by authorities, whether in contemporary Caribbean politics or those of colonial-era plantation societies.

Just years prior to Cuffy's uprising in Dutch Berbice (now eastern Guyana), Britain's Jamaican colony suffered a similar blow to its authority. Now considered the most significant "slave rebellion" occurring prior to the Haitian Revolution, "Tacky's War" of 1760 brought Jamaican plantation economies to a grinding halt for some months. Tacky, like his Guyanese counterpart Cuffy, was of Akan heritage and is also popularly remembered as a ritual practitioner, or *Obeahman*, as well (Bilby and Handler 2004: 178 n.16; Genovese 1979: 36-7). In fact enslaved Akan men and women were particularly notorious for their agentive opposition to enslavement and the primary roles they played in supporting revolt (Konadu 2010: 98-100;

¹⁶ See Fromont 2013 as an exemplary case in Brazil, and see White 1994 for discussions of Pinkster and "Election Day" of Black kings and governors in the US context.

Schuler 2005). That Obeah as a term and concept is often attributed to Akan origins may also speak to this convergence of insurrection and ritual practice within legal and colonial discourses.

It will be useful here to consider what Obeah actually *is*; or as one scholar recently quoted from a protesting crowd's chant to riot police that the officers, or state they represent, did not actually understand "what Obeah does do" (Crosson 2015: 152-3)! What are Obeah's origins, both in cultural practice and in popular and juridical discourses? To what extent can Obeah be considered a distinct cultural tradition, or a "religion," and an *African* one at that? Is it helpful to think of Obeah, as some scholars have, as a set of legal categorizations adopted to label, essentialize, and even condemn a wide array of diverse practices and ideas, and the people that engage them? Other recent work examining Obeah's relationships to state power has defined Obeah by its function as a "justice-making technology," offering a counterdiscourse of social relational models to those discourses privileged by state legal systems or restrictive definitions of "religion" (Crosson 2015). Before exploring more contemporary understandings of Obeah and its functioning in peoples' lives it may be helpful to review some scholarship on the elusive origins of both the term "Obeah" and the loose assortment of practices and ideas to which the label is attached.

Defining Obeah?

Although lay and scholarly considerations into the etymological origins and use of the term Obeah have been widespread for some time, this body of literature is still quite inconclusive as to when, where, and how "Obeah" was first used (Anderson 2010: 11-21; Handler and Bilby 2010: 88; Stewart 2005: 49-55). Attesting to this lack of consensus is a diversity of authorial interpretations offered by standard and specialized dictionaries and encyclopediae, attributing divergent ethno-linguistic origins to the term, time periods of its early use, and even

understandings of what it references. In 2010, the *Oxford English Dictionary* attributed the first records of the term's use to Britain's 1760 Act criminalizing Obeah's very practice. The Act (discussed below) came months after Tacky's rebellion in Jamaica that same year. The *OED* has since updated its Obeah entry, pushing back the date of the term's first recorded use to 1710, reflecting the archival work of Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby who situate its use as well established in Barbados by the 1720s (2004; 2010). These same authors located correspondence between 1710 and 1712 from an English army officer stationed in Barbados to a London address which casually mention how "*Obia*" can be used by "Negros" to "bewitch" one another, and how "one (*Obia*) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our country folk doe [sic] in England" (2010: 88).

Even this early usage suggests Obeah's ambiguity, both to "bewitch" and "cure," and analogous in the army officer's mind to English or other European folk magic traditions. As later records of British legal, lay, and scholarly definitions show, Obeah was (and continues to be) generally represented by its harmful or antisocial side, with curative uplifting dimensions being largely if not completely sidelined or erased (Paton 2009: 2). In practice, Handler and Bilby, as well as others, have characterized Obeah as an "essentially neutral" source of power, in general providing means towards socially beneficial ends such as healing, protection, and communal cohesion (2010: 87; Konadu 2010: 140). However in the context of colonial slavery something socially beneficial to enslaved communities, say collectively resisting torture, could be considered aggressively "antisocial" and harmful by their enslavers. Obeah, with its associations or actual use within slavery resistance movements and struggles, surely was a very real destructive element in the slavers' minds, and equally likely was also used by enslaved people to gain power over others also enslaved.

Identifying Obeah's practices as neutral is misleading in that positive, or socially beneficial goals as well as negative, or antisocial ones are both potential objectives of Obeah, not neutrality (Browne 2011; Crosson 2015; Konadu 2010: 140). These antisocial aspects of empowering practices, usually called sorcery or witchcraft in social scientific literature, are a part of Obeah, just as are socially harmonious curative or protective practices aimed at well-being. And although the disproportionate focus on Obeah's disharmonious sides throughout time have proven detrimental and still fuel legal contentions against "freedom of religion," it is crucial to acknowledge the social harm or aggression Obeah potentially poses, for that may well be a source of its undeniable social power. Recent scholarship on Obeah has tended to downplay roles of any actual harmful aspects within Obeah practice, arguing that the idea of Obeah as (potentially) harmful arose through centuries of colonial legal and cultural stigmatization, and is only an imagined internalized "evil," constructed to condemn. Acknowledging precedents for these "polyvalent, even contradictory, stances" (Crosson 2015: 153) towards Obeah's underlying intentionality offers enlightening insights into the types of associations with Obeah that were most often cited by Guyanese people I encountered throughout my fieldwork. "The meanings of Obeah, as Dianne Stewart has astutely observed, are 'simultaneously dissonant and harmonious, contesting any unidimensional interpretations'" (ibid.; quoting Stewart 2005: 36).

Much of the etymological research on Obeah has taken resolutely antisocial definitions as starting points, having considerable consequences on how certain potential origins get highlighted while others are overlooked (Bilby 1993: 24-6). There is no doubt that Obeah as a term, concept, and practice derives from "probably multiple" linguistic sources, albeit most scholars agree on the likelihood of origin in a number of West African languages (Cassidy and Le Page 1967: 326-7). In his entry for Obeah in the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*,

Richard Allsopp (1996: 412-3) states that “[n]o precise origin has been determined, but some items esp[ecially] in W[est] A[frican] lang[uages] suggest a connection (also quoted in Handler and Bilby 2010: 89). Allsopp then lists five of the more commonly cited etymological possibilities, starting with the Twi word *obayifo*, cited there to mean “witchcraft man,” or “sorcerer” (1996: 412).

A Twi derivation being the most commonly accepted in literature on Obeah is interesting in its direct connection to Akan culture, Twi being one language (or set of languages/dialects) within the larger Akan macrolanguage family (Handler and Bilby 2010: 92; Lewis et. al. 2015). Recall that the word Comfa also derives from Twi. As mentioned earlier, connections between Akan culture and enslaved Africans’ agentive resistance to slavery, as well as between such resistance and empowering features of Obeah have been studied. Similarly various leaders of resistance movements in the British Caribbean have been understood as being of Akan origins, starting first with a several-months-long revolt on the Danish island of St. John in 1733 by enslaved “Amina”¹⁷ (Akan) peoples (Konadu 2010: 98), and then three decades later with Tacky’s Jamaican rebellion of 1760, and Cuffy’s in British Guiana three years after. That a Twi origin of the word Obeah contributes to substantiating interpretations of Obeah’s use by self-empowering (or rebellious) enslaved Akan people in resisting slavery, and that the cultural

¹⁷ The terms “Amina” and “Mina” have complex and unsettled genealogies of usages within the Atlantic world and the African diaspora as. Although various referents have been proposed for the terms, and their origins remain illusive, their presence in slave trade archives attests to the terms’ roles as ethnic categorizations, possibly deriving from the names of coastal West African slave ports or forts. There were several of these ethnicity/place names used in identifying Akan-speaking and related peoples, the most common in British records being “Coromantee,” named in reference to the British Gold Coast fort, “Kormantyn,” built originally in 1631 (Shumway 2007: 248-9). About these two terms, Konadu states that “though their usage overlapped somewhat in the European colonies in the Americas, Coromantee was more British and to a lesser extent Dutch possession, whereas the Danish, Spanish, French, and Portuguese employed Amina or Mina. Mina and Coromantee both have their origins in the Gold Coast...but Mina preceded Coromantee by more than a century” (2010: 6). Amina is also an Islamic name deriving from the Arabic word *amin*, meaning “amen.” As a common Islamic name, Amina was more than likely used in coastal West Africa long prior to the Portuguese establishing their Castelo de Sao Jorge da Mina, or “Fort Elmina,” in 1482, in the region that later became known as the “Costa de Mina,” or Gold Coast (ibid.: 7).

origins of Obeah *practices* are thought to be largely Akan, may be one reason this approach has received such widespread support (ibid.: 139-40). As Handler and Bilby point out, if we acknowledge “that the meanings often attributed to ‘Obeah’ derive from assumptions in the primary written sources that it is ‘essentially malevolent witchcraft’”; and that “etymologists have started with the assumption ‘that Obeah denotes evil sorcery’”; then we can also see other possibilities that begin with more “neutral or positive” definitions of Obeah (2010: 90; quoting Bilby 1993).

Orlando Patterson offers a different Twi word, *Obeye*, translated as “moral neutrality” (1975: 185-195), as a more apt cognate than the negatively associated *Obayifo*, and one that fits more with the pronunciation used for “Obeah” in the English-speaking Caribbean (Stewart 2005: 49-51). Another such example of neutral or positive terms from which Obeah may derive, one that is gaining increasing validation among scholars, is a common contraction of two Igbo words, *di* and *abia*, together *dibia* (Anderson 2010: 18-21; Eltis and Richardson 2013: 82-90; Handler and Bilby 2010: 90-2; Konadu 2010: 140). *Di*, translated as “‘husband’, ‘adept’, or ‘master’, and *abia*, meaning ‘knowledge and wisdom,’” (Handler and Bilby 2010: 92) offer quite divergent denotations than the standards “witch,” “witchcraft,” “sorcerer” or the like. Some translations of the Igbo word *dibia*, and its derivative terms *abia* and *obia*, given in certain dictionaries and other sources convey positive social and curative practices, such as “priest/doctor/diviner,” “practitioner, herbalist,” “spiritual power,” or one with “knowledge of the sacred arts” (ibid.; see Cole and Aniakor 1984: 16-7, 72). In this sense, meanings of the Igbo terms *dibia*, *abia*, and *obia* seem like better descriptors for the holistic (positive and negative aspects, or neutral) and specialized knowledge-based practices that the term Obeah denotes in the Caribbean context (Handler and Bilby 2010: 92).

Another approach taken by some scholars has been to seek out use of the term Obeah, or related derivations, in creolized or “pidgin” languages used in coastal West and Central African slave ports, before being introduced into the Caribbean. This strategy has not yet proven successful, as no evidence has emerged locating Obeah or a similar word in continental African “creole” languages (Handler and Bilby 2010: 93). This lack of evidence for non-Caribbean origination seems to support the idea of its first usage being in the Caribbean. The constricted geographical range of the term’s usage provides further support. It has been widely acknowledged that the term is generally confined to the English-speaking Caribbean, with very limited usage in the US, mainly only South Carolina, during the eighteenth century, perhaps introduced there by recent Caribbean immigrants to that colony (ibid.: 89).

Similarly in the US South, instead of the term Obeah, “Hoodoo” and “Conjure” were (and are) the prevailing words used to speak of similar practices or ideas as Obeah. A scholar of Hoodoo in the US South recently wrote of these connections stating that “Obeah, more than any other African-derived syncretic New World spiritual tradition, resembles African American Hoodoo” (Hazard-Donald 2013: 32). This connection between Obeah and Hoodoo is primarily evident in their similar non-Church affiliated, and loosely organized structures, without regular meeting times or places, and without clearly distinct or wholistic sets of pantheons or ancestral ethnic-based knowledge and practice systems. Additionally, as Hazard-Donald notes, both Hoodoo and Obeah are widely considered “evil” (ibid.), although this does not distinguish the two from other African diasporic religions, such as Vodou or Santeria. The only other location apart from the Anglophone Caribbean where the term Obeah is used is in Suriname, which at one point was briefly a colonial territory of Britain. As we will return to below, in Suriname obia is

understood as “entirely positive,” somehow escaping the negative associations coupled to the term, and practice, everywhere it is used.

Etymological approaches to exploring Obeah’s origins have proven helpful in pinpointing when and where Obeah emerged in use, but they lack a focus on examining origins of actual practices and knowledge that constitute Obeah, as well as what Obeah means in peoples’ lives now. Just as the word used to describe Obeah practices derives from “probably multiple” sources, so too do the actual practices and knowledge that the term describes. Following “single-source” explanations surely obscures the underlying processual and stratigraphically-dense cultural and historical complexities through which Obeah emerged. Yet scholars have presented cases for Obeah epistemologies and cosmologies as deriving from singular root sources, again most evidenced towards either Akan- or Igbo-related hypotheses. For instance Kwasi Konadu contends that even if *dibia*, or its Igbo language variants, may be “the source” of Obeah as a term, the actual “practices subsumed under that terminology” still constitute Obeah as Akan-based (2010: 140). Konadu shows how a set of Akan enstoolment and oath-taking rituals practiced on the Gold Coast by a group of Akan-speakers, were later recreated in Antigua by “Quawcoo (Kwaku)¹⁸, the Old Oby [*obeah*] Man” (2010: 133-40). This cultural continuity of practice, including use of the term “Oby” (recall the Twi [Akan] word Obeye for “moral neutrality” [Patterson 1975: 185-195]) suggests Akan culture as a strong influential force in Obeah’s formation. Perhaps stronger evidence is provided by historical demographics of the Akan diaspora in the Americas.

As was mentioned earlier, the term Obeah is primarily used only in the Anglophone Caribbean, as well as in Suriname, all places of large Akan presences by numbers, including the

¹⁸ The name “Kwaku” (or “Kweku,” “Quaco”) is another example of an Akan Day name usually given to a boy born on a Wednesday (Pendergast nd).

US state (former colony) of South Carolina, where use of the term Obeah has been recorded (unlike most of the US where “Hoodoo” and “Conjure” are used) (Handler and Bilby 2010: 89; Konadu 2010: 140). Enslaved Akan peoples from the Gold Coast, referred to in shipping records and other slaving documents as “Coromantee,” “Fantee,” “Pawpaw,” and other distortions of names of present-day Ghana’s (and surrounding regions) cultural groups, were highly prized by slavers in the Americas (Holloway 1990: 11-3; Konadu 2010: 140). Gold Coast people were specifically sought to perform specialized duties as enslaved artisans and domestic workers in the New World. Concentrations of Akan peoples in Caribbean British colonies, and some North and South American (South Carolina, Guyana, and Suriname) ones as well, constituted dominant groups during the 1720s and 1730s, the same time period that Obeah was first recorded in archival records. Confusing these hypotheses and adding to contentions for a more polyvalent understanding of Obeah, is the fact that Igbo and Igbo-related and other Niger Delta region peoples were also present in considerable numbers in most all of these colonies during similar periods (Handler and Bilby 2010; Holloway 1990: 6-10).

Similarly to how Konadu argues for an Akan foundation to Obeah cosmologies and practice, others have posed Igbo philosophies as correspondingly significant to Obeah. Among these scholars is John Anenechukwu Umeh who shows how the expandingly-holistic concept of *dibia* resists translation out of Igbo into English (1997: 74-6). Perhaps “Obeah” works hard to do just that. Along these lines Handler and Bilby argue that the generality of the concept *dibia*, although incorporating curative and healing techniques, and generally understood as socially beneficial, is loose enough to easily allow for other “African” practices to be amalgamated under the rubric (2010: 92). Ultimately the same holds true for Twi *Obeye*’s inclusive potentialities. It seems as if either way, polyvalent inclusion seems to be a key feature of Obeah’s actual

practices, as well as peoples' understandings of those practices. At issue here though is inclusivity beyond most conceptions of Obeah's defining cultural boundaries, as Obeah practices and knowledge, perhaps considered "African," surely incorporate European, Indigenous Amerindian, and Asian inputs.

In understanding Obeah's various meanings and the theoretical—and political—utilities of such definitions, it helps to consider thoroughly Obeah's discursive uses. Richard Allsopp observes that "written laws and regulations intended to suppress Obeah 'may have done more to officialize and administratively diffuse the term regionally than black usage'" (quoted in Handler and Bilby 2010: n. 27). In its first recorded uses in the early 1710s, Obeah was written about by British colonial officers, although the term may or may not have been widely used by enslaved peoples themselves to describe their practices at this time. Early in its use however, Obeah must have undergone a semantic expansion whereby speakers of various languages—European, African, and others—would come to use the term, with Obeah losing its culturally specific meanings of origin. In this way Obeah can be conceptualized more in line with contemporary understandings of its polyvocal, imbricated, and contingently- and contextually-dependent meanings versus conceptions based on single-origins or unidimensional definitions.

Colonial and scholarly contentions that ritual specialists—whether of Akan or Igbo origin, or neither—were also leaders of slave revolts is a pattern in the Caribbean. Haiti's pre-revolutionary hero François Mackandal is also famously remembered for his local botanical knowledge that proved so significant to the success of the eventual revolution (James 1989: 20-1; Carpentier 1985). Through his work distributing poisons throughout Saint Domingue (now Haiti), Mackandal, as well as his herbal and alchemical practices, gained a vile reputation among colonizers, and some enslaved people alike (James 1989: 20-1). The real and imagined threats

posed to colonial authority by these ritual practitioners prompted Britain, France, and other colonial governments to establish laws directed at criminalizing activities and possession of objects associated with these maligned “sciences,” as they are often referred locally in Guyana and other parts of the Anglo-Caribbean. In 1760, directly after Tacky’s rebellion was (barely) put down, Britain’s Jamaican colony passed an “Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves.” It was the first law to overtly criminalize “the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft” under punishment of “death or transportation” (Act to Remedy... 1760).

We can now return to how these constructed histories of Obeah’s past and meanings relate to Guyana’s contemporary commemorations of Emancipation, and how such constructions are understood and employed in the contexts of Guyanese political and religious life. After Emancipation of enslaved peoples in Britain’s colonies in 1834/8, including Jamaica and British Guiana, these laws no longer held as they were written to apply to enslaved people. Directly after Emancipation new “Obeah Laws” were crafted that took after Victorian vagrancy laws. These laws aimed more at cultural control and “management” than at attempts to discourage insurrections as the earlier laws did (Paton 2013). Whereas Obeah prior to Emancipation had often been read by colonial authorities as a form of political or martial resistance and agency for enslaved peoples, its representation in colonial society post-emancipation transformed it into a cultural “evil.”

Significances of changes in how society and law viewed Obeah over time were important to Guyanese celebrating Emancipation in 2014. Much like North American demonizing caricatures of Haitian *Vodou*-turned-“Voodoo,” Obeah and related practices were portrayed in popular accounts as “atavistic and backwards,” “un-Christian,” and counter to European and Anglo-American notions of advancement (Forde and Paton 2012: 12-14). Similar to popular

representations and discourse surrounding “Voodoo” from the eighteenth century up until today, the idea of Obeah was put to use as an anti-Black racist and White patriarchal supremacist strategy implicating the practice with interracial, sexualized, and un-Christian amorality (Gordon 2012: 768, 780-81). Such views surely persist as many people around the world still equate non-Christian African religiosity with “black magic,” “witchcraft,” and sorcery in the Caribbean today, including some people present in Georgetown for Emancipation Day.

Aside from serving stated purposes of quelling slave rebellions, these ambiguous “Obeah Laws” provided opportunities for juridical control of cultural forms such as religion, healthcare, and social organizations. Today many Caribbean nations still hold anti-Obeah legislation in their law books, and there is a growing movement to counter these unfortunate relics. As slavery was abolished and new laws to address social control and enforced subpersonhood were enacted, the juridical system became, in many ways, a direct replacement for slavery (Alexander 2012). There is little doubt that these criminalized practices played important roles in the daily lives of those utilizing them. That practices were symbolically linked to Africa in colonial imaginations, as well as in some regard in reality, reinforced and played on the associations of “evil,” “uncivilized,” “heathen,” and African culture (Forde and Paton 2012: 12-14; Paton 2013). That said, some scholars have presented compelling arguments that Obeah itself, not only colonial imaginations and fantasies of it, may in some aspects of practice and in particular contexts represent this maliciously violent negative force (Browne 2011: 480). As a mechanism of social control, both enslaved people and their enslavers employed Obeah, and evidence shows that Obeah was used for causing illness, public panics, and murders, as well as healing and promoting social cohesion. Many overlapping and disjunctive narratives on Obeah co-exist today as they had in earlier colonial times when enslaved Africans, Europeans, and Afro- and Indo-Creoles, all

seemed to recognize the potentially violent dangers, and uplifting possibilities, of the ritual practice. This ambiguity, representing freedom and resistance, control and authority, is in large part what makes Obeah “good to think” when scrutinizing politics of cultural struggle in Guyana through peoples’ interactions while celebrating Emancipation.

Part III

“They’re gonna make a *real* African thing of this!”

There is no doubt that various features of Georgetown’s 2014 pre-Emancipation Day activities were purposefully designed to elicit an “African” atmosphere and setting. Moreover, one can argue that a specifically “mystical” and heightened religious aura, an “Afro-mystic” synaesthetic ambiance, was purposefully constructed for this event. Elaborate “sense-scapes”¹⁹ of music, drumming, dance, song, colorful clothes, beads, and other accessories, foods and drinks, physical and temporal locations of memory, and the people—and spirits—present, all contributed to this *synaesthetic totality*. The scene was completed when upon arrival at “Cuffy” (as the site is tenderly referred) an elaborate altar was set up around which the remaining ritual activities of the night would take place. Fostering an atmosphere conducive to *African*-Guyanese cultural nationalism was a key feature that shone through the entirety of the event, and many people present commented on this fact in passing.

Language usage in informal conversational settings served as primary source materials for much of this analysis, a method explicitly countering the too-often hegemonic process of

¹⁹ My use of the suffix “-scapes” is informed by Appadurai’s conception of “ethnoscapes” and the other “dimensions of cultural flow” which he outlines (1990; 1996: 33). -Scape here is used to indicate that the profusion of sensory flows and interactions between performers and audience spectators at Emancipation are “not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors” (1990: 296) The aesthetic assortment presented by Guyanese people at Emancipation hold different meanings and significances for different people, and these meanings get constructed in relation to many other subjective factors.

writing History. Focusing on vernacular and *fugitive speech* acts such as gossip, hearsay, and rumor presents an opportunity to hear from some “small voices of history” (Derby 2014: 124). These genres and “peripheral communication” forms represent under-studied types of knowledge production that are key to locating and analyzing subaltern agencies and critiques of dominant hegemonic processes (White 2000: 38-43). Taking seriously such forms of speech draws attention to an “imaginary line between hearsay and experience,” revealing the constructed nature of all experience, and the crucial role of performance in making “stories” into “accurate Truths” (ibid.: 38-9). Anonymous speech acts, such as those of a parading crowd calling for greater “Afro-Guyanese mobilization,” and “unity in the face of oppression,” or comments that recall controversial deeds of a past president, all present similar challenges to the authorial powers of written historical records. Emanating from a pulsating crowd of hundreds it is near impossible to differentiate who says what, making all speech into an anonymous collective whereby no one person can be singled out for their views. When contentious, non-dominant, and counter-hegemonic views are expressed in public spaces, having collective support is critical to the cause and to people’s safety. Most gossip or rumor is passed in private circumstances specifically because it contains controversial, anti-authority, often private personal information about actual lived experiences, making it such a significant historical source for exploring counter-narratives to popular ideologies (Derby 2014: 132).

As the night progressed, more and more attendees packed into the area surrounding Cuffy to get a glimpse of the ritual action. Space was limited and the sheer number of people made it impossible for all to witness the proceedings. Most people lined around on the outskirts of the area where vendors set up their wares of “African” accessories and other “culture” items, as well as vast arrays of “traditional African” foods and drinks (see image 12). Although the primary

activities focused around the ritual work in front of Cuffy, most people could not see or hear what was going on so instead struck up their own conversations, and some created their own intimate libation ceremonies where they stood.

Bishop Irving and his spirit helpers, *Eshu*, *Shango*, and *Yemaya*, were busily preparing and performing the ritual activities. Ritual items included libations of liquor, water, and food, candles, perfumes, books/Holy Bibles, cloth, plants, animals, and much more. Soon after arriving at Cuffy and taking their places around the altar, two middle-aged Black men joined the small group at the center of the activity. These two men stood with Bishop Irving between them, flanked on each side by either *Shango* or *Eshu*, each wearing their usual suits of red, white, and black satin, complete with decked out cowries and long flowing beaded necklaces of all colors, specific to the deities' tastes. Bishop Irving was in all white garments including a Yoruba-style *fila* hat. The Bishop also sported a collection of colorful *ileke* beads around his neck for the orisha. The two newly-arrived men were wearing wax-print shirts and regular dark slacks, with no hats or other accessories visible. Upon approaching the altar area, the two men were handed ritual objects to hold and manipulate while following the orishas' and Bishop Irving's instructions.

Bishop Irving attempted to get the crowd's attention to begin the public addresses by shouting a few quick greetings and then instructed his orisha to do the same. The crowd of people gathered before Cuffy's platform quieted and focused their attentions on the Bishop responding, "Yes Baba." Others during the night referred to Bishop Irving as *Babalawo*, "Father of/has Secrets," and customary title of specialized Yoruba diviners or priests of *Ifa* divination (Bascom 1991: 81; Pemberton 2000a: 17 and 2000b: 6). Others further out in the crowd paid him no mind and continued on with their *liming*. Then as *Eshu* began to hand three white doves to the

main participants, Bishop Irving and the two other men, many out in the crowd turned their attention to the *now* exciting ritual and tried to find a place in the waves of people to catch a glimpse of the action.

These two men standing at the center of all this excitement, with the Bishop/*Babalawo* between them, each with a snowy white dove in their hands, are very prominent political figures in Guyana. One, the republic's Prime Minister Samuel Hinds, and the other, parliamentarian and main opposition party Chairman Basil Williams, were welcomed by the audience to varying degrees of enthusiasm and many interested comments. After some moving words from Bishop Irving addressing thanks to "our African ancestors" for their "courageous efforts," and after candles were lit and libations poured, the three men released their doves who flew off majestically into the black night sky as shouts of "freedom!," "ashe!," and "*kumbaya!*" filled the air in their wakes.

Before the birds were released there was much buzz throughout the crowd as people suggested the probable fates of these three birds. One man said to a group he stood with, "They've gone too far, they're gonna kill the doves!" Then a next man in the group responded, "They're gonna make a *real* African thing of this!" Many others in the group signaled reverent agreement, and others humor. One woman stated, "Yeah we gotta do our own thing too, right? It's our freedom." This event became a place and time where freedom to be "African" was prioritized. The performance event presented opportunities for "the imaginative creation of a human world" (Schieffelin 2003: 205) where Black Guyanese are "free" and have the political, religious, and socio-cultural agency to create their own world of freedom. Others present did not share these views and voiced their own dissenting opinions. Aside from *voicing* these opinions, many others simply paid no attention to this "African ritualizing," which some present called

“witchcraft,” and instead participated by drinking beers, eating “African” foods, listening to drumming, and *liming* with friends. Disinterest is certainly still a form of participation, one that informs others of a far different tale of cultural conformity. By not being attentive to the ritual work, some African-Guyanese were signaling their non-alignment with Afro-centric attitudes clearly presented at the event. Others went further to verbally signal this non-alignment, while others challenged these views further.

More Obeah “*Politricks*,” Now

As the men at the center of this event stood still—crowd buzzing around them, eyes closed in deep introspection, hands gently securing their feathered offerings—audience members also questioned and debated political significances of their presence. One man, addressing others nearby who were watching the ritual unfold queried the group, “Why’s Hinds and Basil got the pigeons? Guyana needs us some real righteous leaders not no more *politricksan!*” This man, although all for the “Afro-centric” attitude presented by the event overall, was disillusioned by the conflation of religious and political motives, a prominent feature of Obeah practice, too. He was looking for *serious* religious leadership to step up and assist downtrodden people, not more empty promises from parliamentarians and the like. The response he received from a nearby man was telling of the differences in perspectives on such issues even within what gets often presented as a homogenous grouping of “Afro-Guyanese.”

This next man in the group responded that “Fat Man (late president Forbes Burnham) one that freed up African religion for us. Without the man, we couldn’t never done none of this here.” This man was touching on some significant human rights progress thought to be accomplished under the republic’s first Prime Minister/President, Forbes Burnham, an African Guyanese man himself. This point was well received by some within earshot, who agreed that

Burnham and other politicians for that matter, did and still can present uplifting potential for Guyanese in terms of religious and other freedoms. This also sparked conversation on political parties in Guyana, especially the role of the People's National Congress (PNC), Burnham's old party and now that which is said to represent Afro-Guyanese constituencies. Basil Williams, one of the politicians present, is chairman of the PNC, while Prime Minister Hinds represents the People's Progressive Party (PPP), or the "East Indian party," and thus he is seen by some as a sort of token Black politician. By referencing Burnham's work for religious freedom and Afro-Guyanese equality, the man was taken to be promoting PNC values and others were quick to counter his claims. A major contention both at this event and in Guyanese politics in general, is the legacy of Burnham's presidency. No matter how one identifies "ethnically," a position on Burnham is always taken as controversial or contentious.

Along with taking a stance vis-à-vis Burnham and his over two decades in office, one's associations with Obeah also seem to be read as significant aspects of political positionings. Responding to the man's earlier question/comment on "Fat Man's" legacy, a woman exclaimed, "But Burnham only a obeahman himself! That's why he freed it up!" Then adding in rebuttal, "All this nothing but obeah business anyway!," as she turned her body away from Cuffy and the rituals underway in front of him. This woman was repeating a popular claim that Burnham himself practiced Obeah and used it as a means of political and social control over Guyanese people themselves. As president of Guyana, Burnham had his own "Obeah Advisor" called Mother Monica who assisted in his politico-religious undertakings, even within international diplomatic circuits (Vidal and Whitehead 2004: 73; Naipaul 2002: 488). Many popular accounts abound of Burnham's dangerously self-empowering acts, such as his hankering for "one-hundred-year-old Chinese eggs," which he is said to have devoured while in a meeting with other

heads of Commonwealth states in London (Vidal and Whitehead 2004: 73). Through seemingly outlandish acts like these, Burnham secured a prized place within popular imaginations as a source of power not to be reckoned with, both politically and religiously.

Cuffy and Accabre

There are also a number of rumors that circulate in and around Georgetown that associate Burnham's powers with Cuffy and Cuffy's 1763 Monument. As Paul Nehru Tennessee's work shows, part of Burnham's political strategy involved aligning and analogizing himself with Cuffy in terms of character and personality traits, including playing on both leaders' right to authorial rule (nd.). Burnham and his PNC relied on the nationalist historian P.H. Daly's reading of the 1763 Berbice events (Thompson 2006: 199-201). This, according to Tennessee, led to a split between Burnham and some of his constituency, who positioned themselves more in relation to Cuffy's partner-turned-rival, *Accabre* (nd.np.). While the actuality of details of the revolutionary events of Berbice 1763 remain in question, Cuffy is remembered as a domestic, or "house-slave," whereas Accabre, probably of Kongo origin, was a "field-slave" (ibid.; Holloway 1990; Schuler 2005: 380). Burnham and the PNC, following historian Daly's lead, positioned themselves as the new Cuffys, the rightful revolutionary leaders, statesmen at the top of their echelon, capable of national rule by overthrowing the modern-day colonizers. Burnham clearly embraced his role in independence as well as his bourgeois status as sign of his right to rule, as Cuffy is also commonly said to have been most capable of leading the revolution through his domestic enculturation in his Dutch master's big-house.

Cheddi Jagan, once leader with Burnham (before their 1957 split) of the People's Progressive Party (PPP), was British Guiana's first elected Prime Minister under a 1953 colonially administered election, a decade and a half prior to Guyanese independence in 1966.

With Jagan's landslide victory in April of 1953, Britain and the US conspired together to intervene against Jagan's decidedly Marxist orientation, and in October of that year they landed British troops in the colony. The new constitution was suspended and all the newly elected ministers were dismissed, including Jagan, who remained under surveillance. This neocolonial intervention created the political vacuum that Burnham's PNC would soon fill, with the new backing of both US and British political and economic interests.

In Jagan's autobiography (1972), he associated himself not with revolutionary Cuffy, but rather with Accabre, whose namesake was also chosen for the PPP's Marxist research and outreach center, Accabre College. Affiliating himself with Accabre, the field-slave who militantly stood up to Cuffy's seemingly weak stance of compromise and negotiation with enslavers, Jagan positioned himself as the true revolutionary, the people's leader, silenced by the dominating imperial and domestic voices. For Burnham and the PNC, Jagan's use of Accabre was rationalized within their own interpretations of the revolutionary events. Accabre, and so also Jagan, was seen by the PNC, through Daly's reading of historical events, as a lowly grassroots offshoot of insurrection within the ranks of Cuffy's populist campaign. Accabre was an internal problem for *real* revolution, in PNC terms, and so provided the necessary model to justify a dictatorial suppression of all oppositional forces, no matter on which side of the aisle they emerged (Tennessee nd.). Burnham directly linked independent socialist Guyana's (post-) colonial struggles with de-colonization to this earlier colonial revolution in a speech he gave at the unveiling of "Cuffy's" 1763 Monument. Recollecting some key events of the 1763 revolution, Burnham stated, "When Cuffy was able to take over a portion of Berbice he had problems with some of his own followers...[S]ome of them complained that Cuffy made them work harder than the white man had made them work. We are speaking of 1763, I hope not

1976” (1976: 17). Painfully aware of mounting opposition to his long tenure as chief Comrade of the Co-operative Republic’s socialist revolution, he framed Cuffy’s detractors as analogs to those he saw as his own contemporary counter-revolutionary rivals.

When Guyanese speak of the 1763 Monument to Cuffy, political affiliations are not always easily navigable nor understood. Regardless of family backgrounds or ethnic affiliations, Guyanese make different meanings of both Cuffy as a historical character and the contemporary representation of him as the 1763 Monument. That Burnham installed this national icon in attempts to consolidate his own Black nationalist constituency and affirm his right to reign through revolutionary decree, is commonly cited by many Guyanese, some of whom see the Cuffy monument and Burnham as inextricably intertwined.

Cuffy’s and Burnham’s Obeah

Georgetown, the capital, once one of the most beautiful wood-built cities of the world (with the great hardwood forests just a few miles inland), weathered and decayed. Over the run-down city there now rises, at the end of one of the principal avenues, an extraordinary, mocking monument of the Cooperative Republic: a giant African-like figure, long-armed and apparently dancing, with what looks like cabalistic emblems on its limbs. This figure of African re-awakening is said to honor Cuffy, the leader of a slave revolt in Guyana in 1763; but there are black people who believe that—whatever the sculptor intended—the figure was also connected with some kind of obeah working on behalf of Forbes Burnham, the Guyanese African leader. Mr. Burnham is believed to have, in the end, mixed his Marxism with obeah, and to have had an obeah consultant.

~ V.S. Naipaul 2002: 487-8

The monument now popularly called “Cuffy” was installed in 1976 during Burnham’s tenure as Prime Minister. Denis Williams, Director of Art in Burnham’s administration, organized a competition among Guyanese artists to determine what the monument would represent and who would serve as its creator (Greaves 2010: 180). Acclaimed Guyanese sculptor Philip Alphonso Moore’s submission entitled “1763 Monument” was chosen to be permanently

installed in Georgetown's Square of the Revolution. Responses to the prized choice were mixed from the start although the revolutionary spirit represented by Cuffy seemed to be widely appealing (ibid.). But a strong constituency felt that the monument was overly symbolic, and not realistically life-like enough in its portrayal of Cuffy. In Burnham's May 23 speech at the monument's unveiling, he recalled how when prototype images of the statue circulated in local media prior to its construction, people gossiped, asking, "Is that Cuffy—Did Cuffy look like that?" (1976: 8). In similar tones as Naipaul's description of Cuffy above, some Guyanese, particularly those of Indian descent, held (and still hold to some degree) that the statue was too culturally uni-dimensional for a *national* monument, claiming it as African-Guyanese-centric, valuing histories of only part of the national population. Diverging from Naipaul and others' racializing readings of Cuffy, for Burnham, as well as other Guyanese, the monument was made to symbolize Guyanese "cultural unity" "in the tradition of the people of Guyana—the Amerindians, the Indians, and the Africans, the real peoples and all the peoples of Guyana. For unlike average Europeans, these peoples of Guyana have tended to express their feelings in art form symbolically" (ibid.). Within Moore's depiction of Guyana's National Hero, Cuffy, are symbolic elements thought to represent national cultural unity. Despite Burnham's narrative of cultural inclusion, many divergent readings of Moore's monument persisted, as did opposition to its installation. In fact the general climate of political unrest and steadily growing opposition to Burnham's already over-decade-long rule, mobilized against the monument's installation to such an extent that Denis Williams had the twenty foot-tall concrete plinth on which Cuffy stands manufactured to be bombproof (Greaves 2010: 180).

While for some it is Burnham's politics as represented in the monument's installation that raises questions, as well as pride, for others it is artist Philip Moore's aesthetic choices in

rendering “Cuffy” that are contentious. Moore, born in eastern Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1921-2 (sources differ), became a “Jordanite Christian” at about the age of twenty years old (Rajer 1998). Roughly fifteen years later, in 1955, Moore “dreamed that a large hand reached down to him from the heavens, and a voice commanded him to begin his career as an artist” (ibid.: np.). Through this empowering experience, Moore came to recognize himself as a “spirit-taught” artist (ibid.), directly drawing from his Jordanite(/Comfa) practices in rendering his artistic works. This melding of religion into Moore’s artistic practice, although in clear alignment with Burnham’s Afro-centric cultural nationalist stance, fed opposition to the monument’s installation, and continues to provide an interpretive lens for how some Guyanese (and scholars) understand Burnham’s relationship to Cuffy, and how both relate to Obeah.

Cuffy’s stout herculean build, fierce martial stance, and intricately inscribed (what Naipaul calls “cabalistic”) accouterments, like a breastplate or armor, all render this bronze warrior as a figure of power and empowerment. Just who is being empowered though, and to what ends? Burnham saw both “physical and spiritual strength” in the figure’s limbs, as well as in the strenuous grasps of his large hands, each of which “chokes” a reptile-like creature, symbolizing for Burnham “the safeguarding of ‘virtue’” (1976: 8; Araujo 2014: 194). Cuffy’s head is sheltered and adorned by a close-fitting helmet, his mouth open as if yelling or chanting. In his unveiling speech, Burnham told the crowd he saw resistance and “opposition to cruelty” reflected in Cuffy’s “pouted mouth” (1976: 8). Perhaps he was referring to opposition to the cruel violence of slavery in Cuffy’s own times, but surely Burnham also aimed to invoke through Cuffy contemporary resistance struggles engaged in the ongoing processes of de-colonizing Guyana, and countering the interests of his largely Indian Guyanese opposition.

In Cuffy's "pouting" face and "voluminous head," historian Ana Lucia Araujo draws connections to West African *bocio* figures, spirit-empowered and empowering objects used among Fon and neighboring peoples in and around Benin (2014: 194). These potentially curative and protective objects, usually carved of wood, to which various materials are accumulatively affixed in ritual processes, most often feature a disproportionately large and elaborate head as compared to the usually diminutively simple body, or "corpse" as the word *bocio* denotes²⁰ (ibid.). Araujo also supports her connection between *bocio* figures and Moore's statue through the perceived empowerment some Guyanese feel Burnham received through his association with the figure. Other scholars aside from Araujo have also noted how faces sculpted by Moore that adorn Cuffy's regalia are rumored by some Guyanese to depict Burnham, "conferring the monument special powers," accessible through Obeah, and exclusively to the president and his elite comrades (Araujo 2014: 194; Vidal and Whitehead 2004: 73). That Moore conceptualized and constructed Cuffy lends credence in some peoples' minds to such popular rumors that Burnham, and now his political descendants, use the monument to work Obeah on the nation. Moore himself is popularly considered an Obeah adept, possibly due to his Jordanite/Comfa background, and is represented as such in certain popular news sources and scholarly accounts.²¹ However, as Burnham noted in his unveiling speech in the Square of the Revolution, Moore's intentions for the monument may have been more culturally inclusive and not as forwardly divisive as many critics have taken Cuffy to be.

²⁰ In the Fongbe language, *bo-* means "empowering object," and *-cio* means "corpse" (Blier 1995a: 55; Blier 1995b: 73). Araujo's association between Cuffy and Fon *bocio* is interesting, but odd. Relatively fewer Fon people were brought to Guyana, or other plantation colonies, than other African peoples who were enslaved. More interestingly, Fon people and the Kingdom of Dahomey played large roles in the slave trade as "middlemen" providing many of the Africans captured along the "Slave Coast,"—particularly Yoruba peoples—to European slavers (Law 1989). These histories make a Fon-derived interpretation for Cuffy's symbology curious at the least.

²¹ For instance, Moore is also referred to as "*Baba Philip Moore*." See note 9 in Vidal and Whitehead 2004: 78-9, 73.

One feature of Cuffy's getup that is often cited as representing Moore's culturally inclusive intents is the stylized helmet perched atop Cuffy's globular "voluminous head." Although not mentioned in Burnham's speech or in the commemorative pamphlet released by his office detailing the event, at least one other author has observed that Cuffy's helmet may possibly depict or allude to "pre-Columbian-like" helmets worn by indigenous Americans (KNEWS 2008). Certain aesthetic characteristics of Cuffy's head in general align with those of ancient Olmec colossal heads uncovered in present-day Mexico's Caribbean Gulf Coast states of Veracruz and Tabasco, and thought to be carved over 3000 years ago (Coe and Koontz 2002: 62-8) (see images 13 and 14). Although certain stylistic features vary between different examples of these massive basalt heads, of the seventeen so far unearthed by archaeologists since the 1930's, all share distinguishing headdresses that can be seen to parallel the "helmet" adorning Cuffy's head (ibid.). Moore may well have been consciously incorporating such Indigenous Amerindian motifs or cultural-historical references like the ancient Olmec ballgame headgear into his 1763 Monument in attempts to pluralize the appeal of the monument to a broader spectrum of Guyanese. A different and original interpretation being presented here first, is that through incorporating this Olmec aesthetic into his rendering of an historic "African" freedom fighter, Moore may have been lending his support to contemporary historical theories that placed Africans as the original indigenous inhabitants of the Americas.

The same year that Moore's Cuffy was unveiled in Georgetown's Square of the Revolution, Guyana-born historian Ivan Van Sertima published his first speculative theorizing on, as the subtitle of the book explains, *The African Presence in Ancient America* (1976). This highly controversial and even inflammatory book (among Meso-Americanists and historians alike), was published while Van Sertima was still a graduate student at Rutgers University in

New Jersey, not by an academic press, but by Random House that made it a national bestseller, especially among African Americans eager for re-examinations of their own historical representation. The book was titled *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (1976), and in it Van Sertima argued that Africans were in fact the original inhabitants of the (so called) New World. Mexican “explorer” José Maria Melgar y Serrano (José Melgar) was not only the first known person to unearth one of these ancient Olmec heads in 1862, but he also attributed their creation to “the Negro race,” who he felt must have been the former occupants of that land (Hammond 2001).

Over one hundred years later Van Sertima took up Melgar’s same assertion and presented it as an Africa-centered re-formulation of world histories, one that would surely have aligned well with the political positionings of Burnham and his Afro-centric cultural nationalist PNC party. That Moore’s Cuffy is seen as both “a giant African-like figure” and an Olmec warrior may well have been an intentional convergence on the part of the artist directed toward particular cultural-political ends. Including Indigenous Amerindian features in the monument addressed calls for national cultural unity and inclusive representation of all Guyanese peoples. Yet at the same time, if read through Van Sertima’s historical re-framing, Cuffy’s Olmec headdress still privileges African cultures and histories as central to American indigenous and world histories and cultural formations, but maybe only to those people privy to such locally reformulated historical understandings. This included(/includes), importantly, privileging ideas of African- and African Guyanese-led ongoing revolutionary de-colonization of Guyana through Burnham and his PNC’s cultural nationalism. Perhaps similar cultural-political goals guide local Guyanese narrative constructions of Obeah and of Obeah’s role in Burnham’s politics.

In a now-famous speech Burnham delivered in 1973, three years prior to the unveiling of Cuffy, he emphatically mentioned his intention to repeal colonial-era anti-Obeah laws from independent Guyana's official statutes (*Virgin Islands Daily News* 1973: 5). Because of this speech it is commonly understood today, ambivalently, that Burnham did in fact “*free up* Obeah” in Guyana, an agenda still being pursued in many other Caribbean polities. Not all Guyanese view this move as a step toward national *progress*, especially when Obeah continues to carry all types of negative baggage in some Guyanese minds. Many see Obeah as inherently tied to Black nationalist politics represented by Burnham, and something many Guyanese feel has been discredited in today's politics. As mentioned above, recent close examinations of Obeah within actual lived experiences and historical perspectives reveal that ambivalence towards Obeah (does Obeah help or harm?, and who?) is an intrinsic, yet undertheorized, aspect of the practice itself.

Although colonial misperceptions, racist stereotyping, and contemporary pseudosciences all played roles in demonizing Obeah ritual healthcare, empowerment, and social cohesion, recent scholarship by historian Randy Browne (2011) suggests that some of the violence and negativity attributed to Obeah practices is in fact warranted and accurate. Long a popular topic for Caribbeanist scholars, Obeah has most often been characterized as an “African retention” that made its way to the New World with enslaved peoples, largely unchanged aside from specific materials used. This view largely forecloses acknowledging the dynamism of this practice, ignoring the processual nature of culture, which is always in flux—especially as has been shown in this creolizing Caribbean context. With Obeah's practice situated within the constant brutalities of colonial slavery, the argument goes, aspects of that brutally cruel and dehumanizing culture were incorporated into Obeah practice, not only impressions and representations of that inhumanity (Brown 2009: 12-4; cf. Paton 2009). The violence enslavers

and colonizers used to control and exert authority over their captive workers could also be appropriated by these workers in attempts, not only to overthrow the plantation systems that bound them, but also to establish authority over other enslaved people.

According to Browne (2011), the violence and “evil” associated with Obeah comes from its practice as a brutal tool of control used by certain enslaved individuals, Obeah-men and -women, within their healing rituals addressing social or bodily disharmony. Thus it is from “both spiritual and physical powers” that Obeah practitioners’ authorial control stems (Browne 2011: 474). These powers could be read as both hazardously rebellious by slavers and as dangerously controlling by fellow enslaved people. Both knew Obeah held enormous potential of power and control, but for differing reasons and toward differing ends. This ambivalence continues because for enslaved people, Obeah also presented potential benefits as a trusted physical, social, and religious healing modality. This is especially true when considering that healthcare options presented by plantation systems were null and often amounted to torture. Also adding to this confusion, plantation administration too saw benefits to this ritual system and in times of dire need turned to enslaved Obeah practitioners for assistance in quelling disease outbreaks, social disrupt, and unexplainable “supernatural” or para-phenomenal happenings on the plantation (ibid.: 471-473, 477). These ambiguous roles Obeah played in times of slavery surely must persist in how Guyanese people today understand Obeah as functioning in their lives, both within micro-social levels of interaction, as well as the macro-political.²²

²² Ambiguity and indeterminacy as structural features within central African philosophies and worldviews have been theorized by numerous scholars, which has been especially productive in countering unidimensional, constrictive, and often ethnocentric interpretations of these worldviews and associated practices. Writing about “multiple and sometimes competing perspectives” that a Tabwa narrative form called *milandu* may provide its users, Allen Roberts recognizes that *buloz*, “usually translated—and reductively so—as ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft,’” offers similarly built-in contingent interpretive possibilities (2013: 8). Roberts explains how in such reductions and misrepresentations, “too often lost are the ambiguous potentialities of *buloz* that are always subject to interpretation. That is, one observer’s sense that the *buloz* associated with some action is nefarious will invariably be countered by another’s that the very same attitudes and accomplishments are morally justified and astonishingly clever, since they

Continuing Struggles with Remembering Guyanese Emancipation

Some overlapping and conflicting perceptions of Obeah as practiced and regulated throughout Caribbean colonial and *postcolonial* pasts may help explain its inconsistent and differing interpretations by contemporary Guyanese encountered on the night of Georgetown's 2014 Libation Ceremony. Some attendees viewed Bishop Irving's ritual performance as providing an air of "authenticity" to the event in ways that highlighted *African* contributions to the republic, including President Burnham's "freeing up" of "African" religiosity. For others present, this same (imagined) "historical event" of presidential decree in 1973 that "freed" Obeah, represents the "backwardness" of both Obeah and those who practice it, i.e. Black Nationalists like Burnham. Although this Emancipation celebration was primarily presented, and received, as an *African*-Guyanese event, not all attendees conformed to Black Nationalist agendas, and they were sure to express these views to others present. Performing free, agentive, and proud *African*-Guyanese identities surely were major objectives of the event, which was apparent through the strong emphasis on "things African" throughout. One prominent "thing African" was the *use*, or idea of Obeah's use, or other Black religiosities, as political strategies and tools. How did the orisha's presence, Obeah rituals conducted, and Surinamese Maroon performances all combine to contribute to Black Nationalist agendas through *performing authority*?

Earlier while marching along watching the Maroon's vigorous dance/drum moves, one man noted to his companions, "Them Surinamers got the serious power boy! Real Africans them." Popular Guyanese thought holds an ambiguous reverence/fear of Maroon culture and in

have led to a welcome outcome (ibid.). Similar situationally-defined and processually-interpretative understandings apply to Obeah, and perhaps central African epistemological precedents provided Obeah these important features. For arguments consistent with Roberts' on productively understanding these central African philosophical ambiguities, see Geschiere 2004; MacGaffey 1988 and 1998; Sansi and Pares 2011.

some sense of Suriname in general. As peoples that won their own sovereignty from slavery, and to some degree colonialism altogether, the six Maroon groups of Suriname are considered to have maintained astonishing aspects of African cultures through their supposedly isolated circumstances in the Amazonian interior. It is because of this “cultural preservation” of aspects of Maroon language, religion, social structure, dress, food, etc. that Guyanese (and anthropological) tropes hold them as “authentically African.” For this reason Maroons’ (and *creole* Afro-Surinamese’s by extension) *Winti* religion, or “magic” as many Guyanese hold, is highly valued by those that prefer to *use* it, but alarmingly feared by those disinclined towards its *use*. Also, in Surinamese Maroon *Winti* religion, *obia* refer to beneficial divinatory objects or those endowed with other empowering features.²³ Even with their entirely positive local Surinamese attributions, *obia* may perhaps still evoke that “sinister” practice Obeah in Guyanese’s minds, linking Maroon religiosity with other Caribbean ritual practices, and the divergent associations to which they are attached. Certainly the Maroons’ presence that night contributed to this heightened “Afro-mystical” experience in indefinite and hazy ways.

There is no doubt that for Bishop Irving and his orisha assistants, the ceremony itself held substantial spiritual and historical/memorial significance, and was not merely about expressing forms of authorial control. The same can surely be said of that inner circle of Comfa/Orisha practitioners and family members, and for the visiting Surinamese, as well as many other active participants that night. Analyzing vernacular speech acts uttered by those engaged in some way with this ceremony can come across as illegitimizing or overlooking actual practices and reasons given for conducting them by the ritual practitioners themselves. Focusing on hearsay and rumor surrounding the event does not pivot upon such “insider” understandings, but instead recounts

²³ For more on *Obia* in Suriname and in *Winti* religion see Groenendijk 2006; Handler and Bilby 2010: n. 26; Price 2002; Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004.

how people receive and perceive these events as *participating observers*. Better understanding relationships between those present would also be an interesting angle, as the insiders of this inner circle surely have their own interpretations, as do those Guyanese avoiding the event altogether.

By playing on popular associations between African and African diasporic religious and political powers, which can conflate the authority of politicians with that of priests, or vice versa, event attendees could read the entire ceremony indeterminately. The freedom festival became a site of exploring these long-divisive politics through performances of cultural memories. Political posturing and authenticity claiming became frequent responses to these performances of memory, with moral judgments passed on those conducting remembered ritual activities, or those recollecting the promises of Burnham's 1973 speech. Just as the initial Emancipation celebrations of the 1840s and 50s took on more demonstrative and activist agendas, opposed to mere commemorative ones, so too did this 2014 celebration in the ways people turned it into a forum of political, religious, and other identity negotiations. Past experiences—remembered collectively and as individuals, performed for the group through ritual or shouted in argument—were drawn upon in contemplating the present and future of Guyanese cultural politics. There were as many perspectives to account for as there are memories of past cultural-political struggles.

The idea of Obeah as state control mechanism, both for use by or against colonizers in the past and Western governments today, as well as to pressure and influence Guyanese themselves, seems to be a troubling but profound one for those Guyanese who feel they are living under such control. Some people did not like to speak of Obeah as being used *on* themselves by those in power, but were perfectly comfortable to speak of it as a form of

efficacious agency in their struggle to secure rights and services from state controlled sources. As cultural forms popularly associated with “things African,” *Obeah* and other ritual practices were presented at this event as a means of—directly or indirectly—performing one’s “African-ness.” Many Guyanese, regardless of “ethnic” affiliations, were open to donning “African” clothes, eating “African” foods, singing and dancing “African” songs, and, to some extent, participating in “African” rituals. This Emancipation event became a national venue for performing proud “African-” Guyanese pasts while negotiating meanings and roles of those pasts within current socio-political dramas.

Images



Image 1. Suriname Maroons lead the Emancipation parade down Brickdam Street, 31 July 2014



Image 2. 1763 Monument, or "Cuffy," in Georgetown's Square of the Revolution



Image 3. Philip Moore's bronze statue called Cuffy after Guyana's 1763 revolutionary leader



Image 4. Eshu in red hat and bead necklaces stands with Bishop Andrew Irving, 31 July 2014



Image 5. Shango in red and white, 31 July 2014



Image 6. Libation Altar set at the base of Cuffy Monument, 31 July 2014



Image 7. Looking down on Libation altar from above, 31 July 2014



Image 8. Comfa Bishop Andrew Irving stands between Prime Minister Samuel Hinds (left) and PNC Chairman Basil Williams (right) at the center of Georgetown's Libation Ceremony, 31 July 2014



Image 9. Orisha Eshu in foreground with Hinds (left), Bishop Irving (center), and Williams (right), 31 July 2014



Image 10. Shaved Ice Vendor Called “Dougla,” Bourda Market, Georgetown



Image 11. Lively drummers and shakers in a truck-bed at the head of the parade, 31 July 2014



Image 12. Cassava bread vendor at Emancipation Day Festival in Georgetown's National Park, 1 August 2014



Images 13 and 14. Olmec Colossal Head, Mexico



Phillip Moore's "1763 Monument," see Cuffy's helmet

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