

**An Ingenious Method of Causing Death Employed by the Obeah Men of the West Indies**



Austin H. Clark

*American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1912), 572-574.

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*American Anthropologist* is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

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## DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

### AN INGENIOUS METHOD OF CAUSING DEATH EMPLOYED BY THE OBEAH MEN OF THE WEST INDIES

THE great power which the so-called *obeah* men hold over the lower classes of the colored residents of the West Indian islands, even in some of the most highly educated and Christianized communities, is well known to those who understand these people; but among those who regard them merely as negligible "niggers" to be despised, or as just the same mentally and physically (except for the minor detail of skin pigmentation) as the white-skin races, the existence of this power is, unfortunately, usually regarded as visionary, for the colored people are supposed either to be altogether too stupid to exercise it or too highly Christianized and too thoroughly civilized to stoop to such methods to enforce their will, though almost all such well-meaning but misguided individuals admit its persistence, to a greater or lesser degree, in certain communities remote from the elevating influence of the white race.

Like all peoples who live chiefly out of doors, the colored West Indians have a close acquaintance with many of the mysteries of nature which, while not nearly so intimate as that of many other races, is still intimate enough for all the ordinary purposes of life.

Long ago the obeah man of the more progressive communities saw the danger of resorting to the mineral poisons or to the vegetable alkaloids in casting his spells over those whom he desired to remove, and, therefore, in order to retain his power, which of necessity is based on the ability to cause death, was forced to seek some means whereby the same result could be attained without the danger of readily recognizable symptoms coming under the eye of a well-trained medical man. He therefore turned from the mineral and vegetable worlds to the animal, and worked out a method which reflects the highest credit upon his ingenuity, for, while it accomplishes the desired end, it does it in such a way that the doctor is unable to detect in the death of the victim a case of murder, and if his suspicions should by chance be aroused he is equally unable, by legal means, to adduce evidence of such a character as would justify a conviction before a magistrate.

The method of the obeah man is very simple. Securing an ordinary

quart bottle, he fills it about half-full of chopped liver—human liver if he can get it, on account of its enhanced moral effect, though any liver will do. This he places in some warm, moist spot and leaves for a few days. The liver decomposes and attracts numerous blow-flies which lay their eggs in it. The bottle is then removed, stoppered, and put away until the flies begin to hatch out.

Now, the colored people, no matter how thoroughly educated they may be, are desperately afraid of “jumbies,” or ghosts with peculiarly vicious dispositions, which have a wide range throughout the West Indian region and are of very frequent occurrence. At night, to keep these frightful monsters out of their houses, they close all the windows and doors and stop up all the cracks with wadding; it must be understood that the “jumbie” differs generically from the ghost of most other races in having, though amoeba-like and capable of assuming all conceivable shapes, a certain amount of indefinite substance so that it cannot pass through a solid wall. To make doubly sure, the people sleep naked, when the weather permits, as it usually does, except for a cloth over their heads, for “jumbies” always catch sleeping persons by the head, and therefore if this be covered they are, with the other precautions taken into consideration, reasonably safe.

When the obeah man’s bottle is swarming with adult flies, which have been crawling about over the surface of the decomposed liver, he takes it to the house of the person over whom he has cast his spell, pulls out a bit of wadding from a crack, inserts the neck of the bottle, and shakes it, whereupon the flies work their way out into the room. The obeah man then replaces the wadding, throws the bottle where it cannot be found, and goes home. It should perhaps be mentioned that the obeah man is fairly safe from detection on his nocturnal wanderings, as usually he is the only person in the community not afraid to venture out after dark. If any others are abroad he can readily keep out of their way, as, seeking safety in numbers and noise, they will be in bands of various sizes singing or shouting to keep their courage up and to keep the “jumbies” at a distance.

The flies which have escaped from the obeah man’s bottle into the room of his victim naturally collect on the warmest object in the room, which is, of course, the sleeping man. Now, laborers are rarely entirely free from cuts, abrasions, or sores, and these are soon discovered by the flies, which walk back and forth across them. The result is almost certain infection, which, at first not regarded as serious, or at least not serious enough to warrant calling upon the more or less distrusted doctor,

spreads rapidly and the man soon dies in a characteristic way which, in some communities at least, everyone knows to be the result of the obeah man's mysterious but potent charm.

AUSTIN H. CLARK

UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

### THE ROOT KOMPAN: ITS FORMS AND MEANING

THE *Natick Dictionary* was evidently compiled by Dr Trumbull at an early period of his Algonquian studies, and contains, on nearly every page, numerous errors, many of them very serious, and some of which were, as opportunity offered, corrected in subsequent writings, and especially in the able papers which he published in later years. Among such errors are the statements made on page 327 on regard to the verbal root *kompau* and its meaning, referred to by Dr Michelson in the *American Anthropologist* (N. S., vol. XIII, p. 339).

This element of Algonquian synthesis, which would now be written *ka<sup>n</sup>pāw*, and is a root of secondary order, does not mean 'he stands erect,' nor does it, as Trumbull intimates, contain the word *-omp* (*a<sup>n</sup>p*), 'man,' any more than does *ahtomp* (*a'ta<sup>n</sup>p*), 'bow', for which the compiler, on page 104, suggests the meaning of 'that which belongs to a man'. The root is found in forms that vary but very slightly in all the dialects of the eight or nine linguistic groups into which the Algonquian language is divided, except, perhaps, in Micmac, a dialect so aberrant as to constitute a group by itself. Some of these forms are as follows: Cree (Prairie) *-kābāw*, Abnaki (Kenebek) *-ga<sup>n</sup>bāw*, Lenape *-gāpāw*, Ojibwe (St Mary's) *-gābāw*, Nipissing *-kāpāw*, Massachusetts *-ka<sup>n</sup>pāw*, Narraganset (Cowesit) *-ka<sup>n</sup>pāw*, Wea *-kāpāw*, Fox *-gābāw*.<sup>1</sup> The characteristic or final letter of this root is *w*, for which Eliot, as in other cases, substitutes its vocalic relative *u* (*oo*). The personal suffixes employed to form an intransitive verb consisting of this root and a prefixed modifying word are most perfectly preserved in Cree, in which in the singular of the indicative present they are in the 1st and 2d persons *-in*, and in the third *-iw*, which in Abnaki and Lenape are reduced to *-i* in the 1st and 2d persons and to *u* or *o* (for *-iu* or *-io*) in the 3d, and which in Ojibwe and Nipissing have vanished in the 1st and 2d persons, and have shrunk to *i* in the 3d. In all other dialects, eastern and western, they have completely disappeared,

<sup>1</sup> The Fox form given by Dr Jones, and written by him also, perhaps inadvertently, *-gāpā-*, is extremely remarkable, since it is very unusual to find in an Algonquian disyllabic root a long vowel substituted in one of the syllables for a short one, or vice versa.