“They call me Obea”: German Moravian missionaries and Afro-Caribbean religion in Jamaica, 1754–1760

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“They call me Obea” examines the role of obeah within the Moravian mission to Jamaica between 1754 and 1760. While much scholarship has focused on the significance of obeah in Tacky’s Revolt of 1760 and later, there has been less attention paid to obeah before it became linked to rebellion and criminalized in British West Indian law. The Moravian missionary sources, a voluminous yet largely unexamined archive of letters, diaries, and account books written by Moravian missionaries and their enslaved and free converts, offer new insight into the significance of obeah in pre-1760 Jamaica. When Zacharias George Caries, the first Moravian missionary to be stationed in Jamaica, arrived in 1754, he was an outsider on many levels. A German Moravian who had toured with the evangelist John Cennick through the British Isles, Caries brought with him a radical vision of the New Birth and a commitment to converting enslaved Africans to Christianity. Three months after his arrival, the enslaved men and women at the Bogue estate began to call Caries “obea,” a term that Caries defined as a “Seer, or one who is able to see things in the future.” What did it mean for Caries to be called “obea,” and how did his behavior contribute to the perception that he was an obeah man? I argue that Caries’ identification as an obeah man demonstrates that obeah was not just an Afro-Caribbean practice – it was also the frame through which Afro-Caribbeans interpreted European religious and medical practices. Several scholars have argued persuasively that obeah conflicts with European methods of categorization that divide “religion” from “medicine” and “true religion” from “superstition.” This article contends that in order to fully appreciate the role of obeah in mid-eighteenth-century Jamaica, scholars must view Christian practice and European natural history as being part of the Afro-Caribbean category of obeah.

Keywords: Christianity; Moravian; African religions; Atlantic; healing; Caribbean

When Zacharias George Caries, the first Moravian missionary to be stationed in Jamaica, arrived in 1754, he was an outsider on many levels. A German Moravian who had toured with the popular evangelist John Cennick through the British Isles, Caries brought with him a radical vision of the New Birth and a commitment to converting enslaved Africans to Christianity. Three months after his arrival at the Bogue plantation in St. Elizabeth parish, Caries wrote a letter to fellow Moravian Joseph Spangenberg in Pennsylvania, introducing the term “obeah” within the context of his mission:

More and more of them come to the Meeting, so that we will soon have to enlarge our hall. They call me Obea, which supposedly means Seer, or one who is able to see things in the future.1

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Caries’ reference to obeah is surprising because European commentators associated obeah with Afro-Caribbean practitioners, not with Europeans. According to the Jamaican slave owner and historian Bryan Edwards, “All professors of ‘Obi’ are native Africans.” How had Caries’ behavior contributed to the enslaved’s perception that he was an obeah man? And what did it mean for a European to be called “obeah”? Moreover, Europeans tended to view “obeah” as a heathen practice – a form of witchcraft or conjuring. Thomas Walduck, one of the first Europeans to comment on obeah, noted that “One Negro can bewitch another (Obia as they call it),” and that “one (Obio) Witchnegro can cure another.” Caries, by contrast, seemed proud to be identified as an obeah man. As a Christian missionary, why did he so readily embrace obeah?

The timing of Caries’ comment is also significant. While most modern scholarship on obeah has focused on the practice after 1760, once it became linked to slave rebellion and criminalized in British West Indian law, Caries’ letter is one of the few sources that introduces “obeah” in a pre-1760 context. In 1760, obeah practitioners were convicted of participation in an island-wide slave rebellion commonly called Tacky’s Revolt, leading the colonial government to criminalize obeah and define it as a “wicked art.” Once obeah had come to the attention of the colonial government, European travelers, colonists, and natural historians began to write more extensively on the subject. Yet, as Europeans integrated obeah into their discourses on medicine, revolt, and religion, obeah took on new attributes and implications. Over the course of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European authorities, historians, and writers constructed obeah as a superstitious, backward, and pre-modern practice that was the antithesis of Enlightenment-era religion and rationality. These negative views influenced Afro-Caribbean perceptions of obeah, and today the practice remains illegal in most Caribbean countries, including Jamaica.

What role did obeah play in colonial Jamaica – and elsewhere – before Tacky’s Revolt? The Moravian missionary sources, a voluminous yet largely unexamined archive of letters, diaries, and account books written primarily in German Script by Moravian missionaries, offer new insight into the significance of obeah in pre-1760 Jamaica. As religious and ethnic outsiders who oriented their lives toward enslaved men and women, Moravian missionaries offer a novel perspective on the cultures of African and creole Jamaicans. Their commentary and sources provide both new challenges and new possibilities in understanding how obeah functioned as a religious, medical, and cultural practice in enslaved communities in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

George Caries, like other Moravian missionaries, produced a wealth of written material. Apart from his daily diary, he wrote dozens of letters to Moravian leaders in Herrnhut, Germany, and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He kept records about each individual he baptized, listing at the minimum each person’s national background, gender, and marital status. Finally, Caries transcribed letters from a number of his most dedicated congregants. While the letters are largely formulaic and many of the references in the diary are fleeting, the quantity of material is so vast that his notes and comments can be compiled into useful and informative life stories. These sources can then be compared with diaries and letters from other missionaries as well as non-Moravian whites on the plantation.

A close reading of Caries’ letters and diaries indicates that obeah had positive connotations within the slave community and that it blurred the European categories of “religion” and “medicine.” It also suggests that obeah was, as Dianne Stewart has argued, “an institution entailing much more than expert knowledge of botanic therapeutic
properties.” In his years as an “obeah man” on Jamaica, Caries fulfilled a wide range of roles. He combined visits to the sick with worship meetings that emphasized the “blood and wounds” of Christ; he acted as an advocate for the enslaved; he mediated disagreements between enslaved and free blacks; he facilitated a kinship community among baptized converts; he demonstrated supernatural powers through the ritual of baptism; and he officiated creatively in the symbolic world of the dead. Most significantly, Caries’ acceptance of the title “obeah” demonstrates that obeah was not just an Afro-Caribbean practice; it was also the frame through which Afro-Caribbeans interpreted European religious and medical practices. Several scholars have argued persuasively that obeah conflicts with European methods of categorization that divide “religion” from “medicine” and “true religion” from “superstition.” This article suggests that in order to fully appreciate the role of obeah in mid-eighteenth-century Jamaica, scholars must view Christian practice and European natural history as being part of the Afro-Caribbean category of obeah. Only by flipping the hierarchy of categories can the breadth, ubiquity, and significance of obeah be fully understood.

Obeah in Caribbean history and law

Aside from Caries’ letter, there are few references to obeah in the pre-1760 literature. Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby have identified a number of references to “oby” or “obia” in early eighteenth-century Barbados. The English army officer Thomas Walduck referred to obeah in several letters written between 1710 and 1712, categorizing it as a form of witchcraft. In 1729, the Anglican minister of Christ Church referred to “Oby Negroes, or conjurers,” and their “bad practices” while Griffith Hughes, the minister of St Lucy’s parish during the late 1730s and 1740s, referred to the slaves’ “Obeah Negroes [...] as a sort of physicians and conjurers,” or “Obeah Doctors.” In Jamaica, the best-known reference to obeah in the pre-1760 period is from Thomas Thistlewood’s diary. In 1753, Thistlewood observed as Guy “acted [...] his Obia, & c. with singing, dancing & c,” commenting that it was “odd enough.” All of these observations were made by British residents and visitors who sought to map Afro-Caribbean practices onto their knowledge of British culture and belief. For some, “conjurer” was the most relevant counterpart while for others, obeah men and women were “physicians.” Thomas Walduck, the army officer, compared the practice of obeah to folk belief in England, identifying both as a form of superstition, while Thomas Thistlewood, a British overseer in Westmoreland parish, was reminded of an English conjurer in Yorkshire when he witnessed enslaved Africans interacting with a well-known obeah man.

In 1760, obeah men were identified as the principal conspirators of Tacky’s Revolt. The revolt, named for one of the rebel leaders, extended through several parishes and threatened British control of the island. During the course of the rebellion, obeah practitioners used rituals and charms to protect rebels from bullets and encouraged loyalty through binding oaths. In response, the Jamaican Assembly passed an “Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves,” which sought to place greater controls on the enslaved population. For the first time in the history of the British West Indies, the Act also criminalized obeah, which was defined as a “wicked art.” According to the Act, obeah men and women were guilty of “pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil spirits.” The Act also forbid the use of “Blood, Feathers, Parrots Beaks, Dogs Teeth, Alligators Teeth, Broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-shells or any other Materials relating to the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft.” Obeah was...
deemed a capital offense, punishable by execution or transportation, suggesting that it was seen as a major threat to the colonial order. After 1760, obeah references became increasingly common in colonial histories, newspapers, official reports, novels, and plays. The Jamaican slave owner and historian Edward Long depicted obeah men as “pretended conjurers” while Bryan Edwards, a Jamaican slave owner, politician, and historian, called obeah “witchcraft or sorcery.”15 The legend of Three-Fingered Jack, an escaped slave and obeah practitioner, was retold in two novels, as well as numerous theatrical performances and articles.16 As Kelly Wisecup has shown, although these authors sought to control obeah in their texts, they struggled to fully account for the supernatural powers invoked by obeah practitioners.17 Indeed, even as they rejected and mocked obeah as barbaric and ridiculous, colonial writers remained fascinated by the practice. Vincent Brown has argued that “whites both believed in and doubted the efficacy of black supernatural power,” and that after Tacky’s Revolt, colonial authorities betrayed their own fear of its power by making sure to execute obeah men with “more awesome displays than they normally projected.”18

In the post-emancipation period, as Diana Paton has demonstrated, the legal definition of obeah shifted away from the more serious crime of “witchcraft” to the more banal accusation of fraud. Rather than being considered a capital offense, post-emancipation obeah regulations mimicked the English vagrancy law of 1824, which sought to police fraudulent activity. Even as obeah was downgraded as a crime, however, it became more widely prosecuted.19 Paton has shown that the construction of obeah during this period was a “dialogic process” dependent not only on policemen and obeah practitioners, but also on non-practitioners who could choose to report or not report obeah offenses. Still, colonial officials wielded more power to define and regulate the practice of obeah, thereby marginalizing Afro-Caribbean definitions.20

Both colonial and postcolonial governments constructed obeah as an anti-modern category that has been – and continues to be – excluded from the categories of “religion” and “medicine.” While Moravian missionaries, like British commentators, assumed the superiority of Christianity and European culture over African and Afro-Caribbean practices, the volume of their records and the regularity of their contact with enslaved communities provide an opportunity to reconstruct aspects of slave life that remain otherwise obscured. Furthermore, Moravian missionaries in general – and George Caries in particular – tended to be more flexible in their understanding of religious practice, meaning that some practices and rituals that would be considered “heathen” practice by Anglicans were readily accepted and adopted in the Moravian missions.

An outsider in the “devil’s nest”
Zacharias George Caries was an unusual figure in Jamaica. As a Moravian, he was a religious minority in a colony dominated by the Anglican Church.21 As a German, he was a linguistic foreigner in an English colony.22 And as a missionary whose primary goal was to convert enslaved Africans to Christianity, he arrived in Jamaica with very different expectations and objectives than the vast majority of other whites who travelled to the British Caribbean. Yet, while his background and intentions set him apart from other Euro-Jamaicans, Caries held a uniquely protected position as the emissary of two wealthy planters.

Caries’ patrons, William Foster and Joseph Foster Barham, were absentee planters living in London. In the mid-eighteenth century, the brothers met the Moravian preacher
John Cennick and experienced a religious awakening that prompted them to rethink their relationship with their enslaved workers. In the wake of their conversion, Foster and Barham began to communicate with Cennick about their moral qualms employing “heathen” slaves. Their discomfort quickly translated into a proposal for a Moravian mission station. William Foster promised to provide missionaries with a house and 100 acres of land, while Joseph Foster Barham offered the brethren 300 acres of land and a house. George Caries, who had toured the British Isles with John Cennick and was acquainted with Foster and Barham, was chosen as the leader of the new mission, alongside with Thomas Shallecross and Gottlieb Haberecht.

Caries and his brethren departed from London on 6 October 1754 after a meeting with Foster and Barham. Throughout their journey, the three missionaries set themselves apart from other whites. On 12 October, a week into their journey across the Atlantic, Caries wrote, “the People ask’d Br Sh[alle]cross if we were Jews, since we observ’d the Sabbath.” Shallecross replied, “you may think of us what you please, but I can tell you our Religion is the crucified Savior.” The missionaries’ defensive posture reflected the Moravians’ precarious political situation in the 1750s. Due to their radical stance on gender and worship, which emphasized the “blood and wounds” of Christ, the Moravians had gained a controversial reputation among Protestant circles in Europe and the Americas and anti-Moravian pamphlets circulated widely around the Atlantic. The Moravians had faced banishment in some regions, and they were eager to gain recognition from European governments. They achieved official sanction from the British government in 1749 when Parliament, with support from Anglican bishops, recognized the Moravian Church as “an Antient [sic] Protestant Episcopal Church.” While the Act gave the Moravians access to the British colonies, the Moravians still faced antipathy, both in Europe and the Americas.

Caries, Shallecross, and Haberecht arrived in Jamaica on 6 December 1754, less than a year after Foster and Barham’s official proposal. Despite their official recognition by the Crown and the support of two wealthy absentee planters, Moravians remained outsiders in Jamaica and many British colonialists were wary of the brethren. The Anglican clergy was particularly suspicious of the new arrivals. When Doctor Harris, the minister of St. Elizabeth Parish, heard of Caries’ arrival, he was “alarmed,” and planned to complain to the local Vestry. When Caries heard this news, he sent word to the minister that his “intention was not to infringe on any of his Rights, nor to marry or baptize any of the white People.” Again, in September of 1755, Caries made a great effort to publicize the fact that would not evangelize to whites. Caries’ interest in converting only enslaved Africans was indicative of the broader Moravian mission. The Moravian church, unlike other Protestant denominations at the time, specifically targeted non-Europeans as their objects of conversion in the Caribbean. This policy was due both to idealistic goals and pragmatic decisions. As Moravians became increasingly unpopular in Europe, evangelizing to non-Europeans allowed them to claim that they were not seeking to “steal” converts from other churches, but were instead attempting to bring the gospel to “heathen” who would otherwise remain ignorant of Christianity.

While Caries focused on preaching to enslaved and free blacks, the Anglican Church in Jamaica had long since established itself as a planter’s stronghold. Although small numbers of Afro-Caribbeans were baptized in the Anglican Church, it remained a predominantly white institution that catered to the needs of the white elite. The differences between the Moravian and Anglican clergy were both cultural and theological. Aside from primarily targeting the black population in Jamaica, Moravians
also set themselves apart in their style of worship and their communal living systems. Caries was a proponent of the “blood and wounds” theology typical of the Moravian church during the mid-eighteenth century. He emphasized heart-felt worship of Christ’s physical wounds and imagined communing with Jesus through his bloody body. A week after his arrival in Jamaica, for example, he wrote that he “held a long conversation with my dear Lord, desired him to anoint me afresh, to plunge me deep into his dear Wounds, & bless me with his thro[pierced] Hands.” This type of worship contrasted sharply with the more liturgical and formalized rituals of the Anglican Church, and it was heavily criticized by many mainstream Protestants.

While Caries was an outsider in his theology and his worship practices, he arrived with powerful political backing from Foster and Barham. As a result, the white overseers and managers on the Bogue estate were obliged to accept and support his presence on the plantation. When Caries first arrived, he noted that the attorney, a Scotsman named Mr. Robertson, “welcomed [him] very affectionately.” Caries then presented him with letters from Mr. Foster and Mr. Barham, upon which “he rose, took me by the Hand, and bid me welcome and wished me much Blessing and Success in this country.” Since Caries had a close relationship with his superiors, Robertson knew it was in his best interest to make Caries feel welcome.

Mr. Robertson’s endorsement of Caries meant that the enslaved workers on the Bogue estate would have been introduced to Caries as an important figure. Mr. Robertson personally accompanied Caries around the plantation, where he noted, “many of the Negroes welcomed me, [and] they were pleased to hear that I came from their Master Mr. W. Foster.” Whether or not the men and women working at the Bogue were actually “pleased to hear” this, Caries was immediately associated with the plantation elite and, in particular, the absentee owners of the estate.

“*They call me Obea*”

In the weeks after his arrival, Caries presented himself to the enslaved men and women at the Bogue as an individual who was skilled in both medical and spiritual matters. Unlike other whites, he began to visit the slave dwellings, making sure to attend to the needs of the ill; he acted as a mediator between white overseers and enslaved workers, as well as within the slave community; and he used Moravian rituals – particularly baptism and burial – to cultivate support for his God. On 23 December, he wrote that he “visited a sick Negro” with Dr. Felton, one of the estate doctors. Soon thereafter, he reported regular visits to the enslaved men and women at the Bogue and other nearby estates, where he paid particular attention to the ailing. By making it a priority to tend to the sick, Caries was demonstrating proficiency in healing, typical of obeah men in the eighteenth century. As Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby have argued, early references to obeah suggest that obeah was part of the Afro-Caribbean “medicinal complex.” Griffith Hughes, the rector of St Lucy parish on Barbados, for example, referred to “Obeah Negroes […] as a sort of physicians and conjurers, or Obeah Doctors.” And in modern maroon communities such as the Aluku (Boni) of French Guiana, “obia” most commonly refers to “medicine, remedy or healing power.”

In recognition of his regular visits to the slave huts, enslaved people began to give Caries gifts. On 21 January, he wrote that after he “visited the sick Negroes,” he received “a Plate of Candid Sugar in the Name of all the Boilers of the Sugar.” This gesture from the sugar boilers, who were among the most powerful slaves on the plantation, suggests
that Caries was gaining prestige within the slave community. In the following weeks, Caries reported almost daily visits to the “sick negroes” on the plantation as well as increasingly large worship meetings. On 26 January, he reported that after he “visited the sick Negroes” in the afternoon, “a large Number of negroes [came] to the Meeting.”

Caries combined his visits to the sick with regular worship meetings where he spoke about the blood and wounds of Christ. Several scholars have suggested that the distinctive Moravian theology and worship practices may have appealed to Afro-Caribbeans more than the formalized and hierarchical rituals of the Anglican Church. As Jon Sensbach has shown, the Moravian Brethren offered a more visceral and ceremonial Christianity than most other Protestants, and several of their symbols and traditions (particularly their emphasis on blood and their frequent singing) had counterparts in African religions. The Moravians also placed less emphasis on “sin” than Calvinists, which was helpful because most African languages had no translation for that theological concept. Caries emphasized blood, wounds, and suffering in his sermons. During his worship meeting on 9 March, for example, he reported talking about Jesus’ “bleeding wounds, his bloody sweat, pain, agony & the great love to sinners.”

Caries’ theological focus on pain, rather than sin, was likely appealing to enslaved men and women who were forced to endure immense physical and psychological suffering within the brutal Jamaican slave system. His emphasis on healing, meanwhile, would have demonstrated his ability to improve the lives of his congregants. While Caries did not go into detail about what type of healing work he performed, his diaries indicate that he most often treated non-working slaves. His willingness to treat older enslaved people set him apart from the plantation doctor, who would have focused his efforts on productive laborers. This clearly made an impression on the slave community, as evidenced by the gifts he began to receive after performing medical work.

Three months after his arrival, Caries wrote a letter indicating that the enslaved men and women at the Bogue had begun to call him “obeah.” This suggests that in a relatively short time, Caries had earned a title of respect within the slave community. It also implies that the enslaved viewed Caries’ behavior in his first three months at the Bogue – including his visits to the sick and his worship services emphasizing the “blood and wounds” of Christ – as indicators of obeah. Interestingly, Caries’ perception of obeah differed from other European commentators. Rather than comparing obeah to witchcraft or conjuring, as many British observers had, Caries wrote that obea “supposedly means Seer, or one who is able to see things in the future.” Since Caries spent a significant portion of his time with the slave community, his perception of obeah and its role in the slave community undoubtedly derived from the enslaved men and women at the Bogue. His definition also aligns with the one offered by Dianne Stewart, a historian of Afro-Jamaican religions, who has suggested that “in the pre-emancipation period, Obeah encompassed […] a priesthood of sorts, religious offices such as mediums, diviners, and other gifted or trained spiritualists.” While Caries did not provide any evidence in his journal for divining power, he had clearly succeeded in presenting himself as a powerful spiritual practitioner who had expertise in healing both bodies and souls.

The attractions of baptism
A few weeks after he was identified as an obeah man, Caries reported that the first baptisms would soon take place. “Their names,” he wrote, “are 1) Coffee, who will be
named Ludwig after our dear Papa and 2) John, after our dear Johannes” (the Moravian leaders Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf and Johannes von Watteville, respectively). Caries added that they had 12 candidates for baptism and, perhaps most surprisingly, he had had some success preaching among the “frey Neger” or Maroons. By June, Caries was desperate for Moravian reinforcements. “The number of our dear black audience is always increasing, and our new chapel that was just enlarged will soon be completely full.” By the end of 1756, Caries had baptized 69 male slaves at the Bogue, nearly half of the enslaved male population on the estate. Considering that infants and boys were included in the tally of 154, the enslaved male converts at the Bogue was probably more than 50 per cent.

While Caries viewed the high rate of baptism as a sign of his success, a careful reading of Caries’ journal demonstrates that it was the enslaved men at the Bogue – not Caries – who provided the impetus for baptism. In fact, Caries actually disobeyed orders from the Moravian leadership by performing baptisms after just four months in Jamaica. Count Zinzendorf and Johannes von Watteville had instructed Caries to be careful in his bestowal of the sacrament and to wait for a long period of time before baptizing anyone. Caries, who was well aware of these guidelines, tried to justify his baptisms in his diary and letters, but it is clear he knew he had acted inappropriately. He regularly wrote about the pressure he received from the enslaved to perform baptism. In July 1756, Caries complained,

> [w]e already have 57 baptized, [and] [w]e also have just as many candidates for baptism, many of whom overrun us, begging for baptism, and we have no reason to object to this, but we are still very sparing with baptism because there are already too many baptized.

Caries’ defensive tone was indicative of his discomfort with the number of baptisms he had performed.

As this chronology illustrates, it was the men and women at the Bogue who demanded baptism from Caries. Furthermore, it not until the enslaved community had identified Caries as an obeah man that a large subset of the population requested Christian baptism. While Caries viewed his baptism rates as a sign of Christian conversion, the enslaved blacks who sought out baptism did not interpret the rite in the same way that Caries did. Historians should interpret these “conversions” from an Afro-Caribbean perspective, asking what Caries had done to be identified with obeah and what his theological and worship practices may have meant to his enslaved “converts.”

Many African-born men and women may have seen similarities between Caries’ baptism and their own religious traditions. In the Danish West Indies, the Moravian missionary and historian C.G.A. Oldendorp interviewed a number of slaves who compared Christian and African baptism. Based on his interview with enslaved men and women from what Oldendorp called the Watje nation, he concluded,

> They have some form of baptism everywhere. It happens usually with children who are already rather big, but sometimes with little kids. They make a circle under the open sky. The black priest stirs water and salt together in a jug, and the mother brings the child to him. He puts the water in a calabash and pours it over the head of the boy three times and also prays that God will help him and protect him from his enemies.

While the ritual that Oldendorp described was not a Christian baptism, it is telling that the men and women he interviewed compared Christian baptism with this African religious
ritual. This shows that the enslaved converts interpreted Christian rituals through the lens of their previous religious experiences. The water ritual described by Oldendorp, for example, was intended to “protect” the baptized “from his [or her] enemies,” and to request help from God. It is likely that Afro-Caribbean converts had similar expectations for Christian baptism – they believed that it would protect them from harm and improve their relationship with God.

The possibility that enslaved Africans interpreted Christian baptism as a form of spiritual protection is further supported by the commentary of Edward Long, the eighteenth-century Jamaican slave owner and historian. In his History of Jamaica, Long wrote:

The most sensible among them fear the supernatural powers of the African obeah-men, or pretended conjurers […]. But the Creoles imagine, that the virtues of baptism, or making them Christians, render their art wholly ineffectual; and, for this reason, many of them have desired to be baptized, that they may be secured from Obeah.57

Although Long was dismissive of obeah and his texts must be used with caution, his reference to baptism is significant. While Long assumed that Christian baptism was fundamentally separate from obeah, his comments support the interpretation that the two practices had significant similarities; both promised spiritual benefits for their adherents. Indeed, Caries was vocal in advertising the advantages of Christian baptism, though he focused on the post-mortem benefits: he promised his congregants that Christianity would bring relief from work, spiritual union with God, and happiness “for ever & ever.”58

In addition to seeking spiritual protection through baptism, Afro-Caribbeans at the Bogue saw similarities between Caries’ God and the gods of their homeland. In June of 1756, Caries wrote about a conversation he had with a number of enslaved Africans about their gods:

[W]e had a [meeting] with those who were last baptisd [sic], at which the guinea Negroes related a good deal abt [sic] that country & that they always believed there was a God, whom in Coromantee they callld [sic] Jamconpon, in Ibo, Gicoquowi & in Congo, Simiapumo … but that God became a Man, sufferrd [sic] & dyd [sic] for us, this no one in that Country knew any thing of.59

While most missionaries would have rejected African gods immediately as signs of “heathenism,” Caries exhibited more flexibility. He and the newly baptized slaves all agreed that they believed in more or less the same God, and that God could have different names. Rather than rejecting the African gods, Caries informed the enslaved converts that they lacked only a critical piece of information: “that God became a Man, sufferrd & dyd for us.” Significantly, Caries presented Christian belief as compatible with the Ibo, Coromantee, and Kongo gods. Within his framework, the enslaved converts just needed to add a piece of knowledge to their repertoire in order to correctly understand the “true” Christian God. In other words, what Caries’ understood as “conversion” – a word that implied a “new birth” and a departure from the past – the enslaved took to be valuable knowledge that could be accommodated within the scope of their religious beliefs.

**Mediation and mentorship**

Aside from offering spiritual protection through baptism, the institutional structure of the Moravian Church provided two important social needs: mentorship and fraternal bonding.
While these roles are not always associated with obeah men and women, Dianne Stewart has suggested that obeah was more multifaceted than most European commentators and scholars have assumed. Stewart has sought to “reframe Obeah as a protean institutional structure,” analogous to European institutions such as Christian churches. In keeping with this perspective, I suggest that it is important to recognize Caries’ efforts to build an institution around his spiritual powers.

In his worship meetings, Caries divided the enslaved population into different groups: he held one meeting for anyone, and then held separate meetings for baptized members and baptismal candidates – individuals who showed greater promise and interest in the Moravian church. It is significant that only men were baptized at this point in the mission. This was because Caries had decided not to baptize any women until a female missionary arrived. As a result, Caries may have inadvertently been creating an exclusive community that held similarities with African fraternities. James Sweet has demonstrated the centrality of Catholic brotherhoods in Brazilian social and cultural life. Many of these societies excluded women, so Caries’ refusal to admit women to his more exclusive meetings may actually have worked to increase participation among men in the enslaved community.

In addition to facilitating fraternal communities, Caries acted as a mentor and a mediator of disputes. Sometimes Caries advocated on behalf of the enslaved in the face of the plantation’s overseers and attorneys. Even un-baptized slaves would ask Caries to intercede on their behalf. In May of 1755, Caries recorded one example of a runaway who returned to the plantation and begged Caries to speak to the overseer on his behalf. Caries did so, after which “he was forgiven upon his promising never to do so again.” After helping this individual avoid punishment, Caries reported that he “took an opportunity to tell him something of our Savr & the tears came into his Eyes.” Caries’ message was most likely more powerful after he had proven his ability to persuade powerful figures within the plantation hierarchy to improve their treatment of enslaved workers.

While Caries occasionally acted as an advocate during disputes between enslaved workers and overseers or attorneys, it was far more common for him to act as an ad hoc arbiter of disputes between slaves. For example, in January of 1757 Caries was called to mediate a fight between the baptized slave Manaseth and his wife who were quarreling because, as Caries understood it, Manaseth’s wife had been caught together with another enslaved convert named Zacharias. The enslaved also sought Caries out when there was a food shortage on the island, as we will see. By taking on these roles, Caries was bolstering his reputation as a powerful individual on the plantation who was working to build an institution – the Moravian Church – for the enslaved.

While Caries may initially have been recognized as an obeah man, he was different in an important way from most Afro-Caribbean obeah men and women; he did not charge a fee. It had probably never occurred to Caries that he could – or should – be charging slaves for his services (he never mentioned it as a possibility), but a later missionary to Jamaica did recount one story of a woman who found this fact surprising. On 9 December 1765, a Moravian missionary from Mesopotamia plantation wrote:

A negro woman who we didn’t know asked one of our negro women whether it was true that her pastor would really baptize people, because she had heard that he did it for free. The woman answered that the pastor first had to get to know her.
This story betrays an important point; many enslaved and free blacks would have expected to pay for blessings or religious rituals performed by qualified spiritual practitioners and it would have been strange that the Moravians provided baptisms “for free.” It is also interesting that the enslaved Moravian woman did not feel it was important to mention that baptism required some sort of conversion. According to her, the “payment” for baptism was purely interpersonal: she had to let the pastor “get to know her.”

“Blessed are the dead”

Spiritual and ceremonial benefits were also central to Caries’ popularity and his association with obeah. The ability to control mortuary rites was vital to the creation of power and influence in the eighteenth-century Caribbean. As Vincent Brown has shown, funerals and death rituals were a vital social activity for both masters and slaves. Caries, like other obeah practitioners, was a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Using the image of the crucifixion, Caries actively took part in the struggle to gain control of the meanings of death.

Caries spent a significant portion of his diary discussing his participation in various funerals and deathbed conversations. The most striking of these occurred at the death of Sampson, a baptized driver and a well-respected leader within the enslaved community. Using eight full pages of his diary, Caries recounted every step in the process of Sampson’s death and burial. On the morning of 4 October, Sampson “sat on a stool, where he spoke to the Savior by himself” and then “slept until midday at 12 o’clock.” At noon, Caries was called to Sampson’s side just in time to see him “go home.” He blessed him with the verse, “The soul of Christ restores you.”

Sampson’s funeral was an important event and drew a large crowd. Normally, his burial would have been organized by other enslaved blacks. But since Sampson was a Christian, Caries directed the ceremony. Sampson’s prestige among the enslaved added further weight to the event. Caries noted that several enslaved and free blacks came to visit Sampson’s body and that they “had seen him as their father.” Yet Caries also worried that Sampson’s prominence might mean that he would be stripped of the opportunity to lead the burial. “When such people die who are important to the negroes,” he wrote, “thousands come and they make such a dreadful noise and carry on the entire night” (4 October 1756). Caries wanted something different – and distinctly Christian – for Sampson. He was determined to lay him to rest in Gottes Aker, or God’s Acre, a burial plot the missionaries had set aside for the baptized. He planned the burial for the morning of 5 October, when all of the baptized brethren would be able to attend. In preparation, he and his helpers “dressed the corpse in white and ornaments of red bands” (4 October 1756).

As Caries and the other brethren prepared for Sampson’s funeral, they were shocked to hear that another enslaved person – this time a baptismal candidate named Manatie – had died suddenly. Caries took it as another sign from God and took advantage of a unique opportunity to describe the blessings of a Christian death. He was delighted to see “many unknown negroes” in the audience as he told them how blessed our dear Sampson was now with the Savior, and also about our Manatie and about the blessing that we all had to await, now that the dear Savior had taken two out of our midst in one day. (4 October 1756)
Following his sermon, Caries was told by a number of enslaved people that “their hearts burned for the Savior, and they wished that it had been their time to go to Him” (4 October 1756). On the following day, Caries again assembled the congregants in the chapel to sing. The favorite converts were chosen to carry Sampson’s body to the burial ground where the enslaved, all dressed in white, “formed a double circle around Gottes Aker” (5 October 1756). Following the ceremony, the burial party returned to the chapel where Caries preached from Revelations: “Blessed are the dead, which die in the Lord, from henceforth. Yea, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them” (5 October 1756). Caries chose the verse well; the promise of rest from work and the blessings of the Savior were surely appealing to those who listened to Caries’ words.

After Sampson was put to rest, Caries was delighted when “various negroes came to me and requested that I bury Manatie as well” (5 October 1756). The invitation to speak at a second funeral meant that Caries was gaining influence and prestige within the slave community. Caries’ description of the funeral emphasized both the powerful imagery of Christ’s crucifixion and Caries’ desire to control the symbolism of the ceremony:

> Everything was in good order, and they had left the coffin open to show me the corpse, which was dressed in white. They hadn’t put either salt or rum in the coffin like they normally do. We formed a circle around the grave and because there were a lot of unknown negroes there, I held a Discourse about the immortality of our souls, and where the souls of the believers go; also about the incarnation and the reasons for his death, and about his and our own tranquility in the grave. (5 October 1756)

Caries’ relief that the slaves “hadn’t put either salt or rum in the coffin” betrayed the fact that he lacked full control of the symbolic world of death. His tone implied that if he had found Manatie’s coffin with salt or rum that he would have had no way to alter the situation. The fact that the corpse was “dressed in white,” meanwhile, struck Caries as “in good order.” The juxtaposition between his acceptance of white dress and his rejection of salt is an interesting example of the contingency of cultural connection. As Daniel Thorp has shown, wearing white at important ceremonies was already an accepted practice among both Christians and a number of African nations. As a result, white dress was easily assimilated into Christian practice, despite its “heathen origins,” while salt and rum retained their non-Christian associations. Yet it seems doubtful that Caries would have objected to leading the funeral even if he had found salt and rum in the coffin. As he demonstrated in his “Discourse,” he knew how to capitalize on the popularity of death ceremonies and his sermon was carefully crafted to make a Christian death seem more desirable than other types of death. Only Christians would be “tranquil” in their graves, and only he could explain the “reasons for death” and the destination of dead souls.

### Failing as obeah men

Caries’ burial of Sampson and Manatie marked the high point of his spiritual power in Jamaica. When his long-awaited reinforcements, the missionaries Christian and Anna Rauch, arrived in January 1757, he had already noticed what he considered to be “sinful behavior” among his converts. As the year progressed, the situation deteriorated rapidly. The new missionaries landed on the island “just before the beginning of the sugar harvest,” so they could only have “2 meetings for the baptized and candidates before
sugar making got in the way and the negros had to work day and night.” Indeed, Rauch was not even able to speak to each of the baptized before the sugar season began. As Caries explained in a letter, “the sugar crop took unusually long this year, six and a half months.” During this “hard time,” Caries continued, “some of the baptized have fallen openly into sin.”\textsuperscript{573} “Sinful behavior” could be sexual – what Caries would have deemed “promiscuity” – or cultural. For example, Caries did not want his converts to participate in “heathen” ceremonies such as non-Christian funerals or celebrations.

Once the sugar season was over, the missionaries planned to meet more regularly with their converts, but Rauch came down with a violent fever and was close to death.\textsuperscript{74} In October of the same year, Rauch had recovered from his illness, but the enslaved men and women at the Bogue did not resume visiting the missionaries. The sudden shift in the Jamaican mission can be seen not only in Caries’ reports of “backsliding,” but also in the number of baptisms taking place on the plantation. While Caries baptized 26 individuals in 1755 and 43 in 1756, only 7 men and women were baptized in 1757. This is especially surprising because 1757 was the first year that women could be baptized. Previously, the lack of a female missionary meant that women had to remain as candidates and Caries had frequently complained that the women were clamoring for the sacrament. So why, when Anna Rauch arrived in 1757, did the women not seek her out as the men had sought out Caries just two years before? Indeed, of the seven individuals baptized that year, only two were female. Two others were drivers on a separate plantation, and all but one was African-born.

The enslaved men and women’s rejection of the missionaries is just as hard to explain as their initial embrace, but there are some clues. First, as Caries mentioned frequently in his letters to Germany and Pennsylvania, the sugar season was especially difficult and long in 1757, meaning that the missionaries did not have much access to their congregants. Still, Caries performed well during the harvests of 1755 and 1756. In fact, it was during the harvest when he conducted his first baptisms. So even if the sugar season was especially strenuous in 1757, there must have been other reasons for their abandonment of the mission. In his letter to Spangenberg, Caries gave two more reasons. First, Caries felt he had been too gullible with the slaves. The “great love I feel toward the negroes,” he wrote, “has made me blind to many things.” Specifically, Caries noted that the enslaved could “imitate our language without feeling it in their heart.”\textsuperscript{75} Caries was also concerned that creole slaves had been too influenced by Jamaican whites and that they were, in turn, corrupting the “simple” African-born slaves. Both of these claims need to be investigated further.

Caries’ claim that his converts had been mimicking his language without true feeling in their hearts was an issue that confronted all Moravian and non-Moravian missionaries working among people with a different mother tongue. In Jamaica, Caries could not always communicate with his converts and on a number of occasions, he reported that he needed a translator to conduct his baptismal ceremonies. Indeed, the majority of Caries’ converts were African-born, meaning that while many spoke English, some did not.\textsuperscript{76} But more importantly, even those who had learned English would imbue English words with interpretations that built on their native tongues. And some of the most significant Christian phrases and words – “sin,” for example – had no equivalent in most West and West Central African languages.\textsuperscript{77} The “heart,” a key word for revivalist preachers like Caries, also had different connotations. In 1759, when the Moravian missionary Nathanael Seidel arrived in Jamaica to conduct a series of conferences on the state of
the mission, he alluded to this problem. In the notes from the fifth conference report, Seidel noted,

[the expression “my heart burns” does not mean the same thing among the negroes as it does among us; why? The negroes usually use this phrase only when they’re in a fight with someone and are full of rage and strife, then they say: my heart burns against you.]

Missionaries were advised to pay closer attention to the meaning of certain expressions and to learn more about how their words were being interpreted.

Translation problems were, of course, not restricted to the realm of language. Social behavior also needed to be interpreted, and the enslaved and missionaries were often at odds in their understanding of particular actions, ceremonies, and obligations. While Caries thought of himself as a savior of souls, for example, the slaves on the Bogue plantation attempted to fit Caries into a number of different roles: they initially called him “obeah,” suggesting that they saw certain qualities in him that were similar to obeah men, and they sought him out as an advocate and looked to him for support and blessings. What did these differences of interpretation have to do with the mission’s temporary failure? I suggest that the missionaries’ inability to live up to the expectations of obeah men was an important factor in the failure of the mission.

In July 1756, half a year before the arrival of Rauch and the other missionaries, Caries noted that there was a massive food shortage, in which unequal distribution of scarce supplies resulted in the starvation of enslaved people on the island. “Several of the Negroes in Cabbage Valley, (4 miles from hence) had drop’d down dead in the Fields for Hunger & want of Food,” he wrote. “The distress among the poor Negroes at present is impossible.” Making matters worse, “[m]any of their Masters and Overseers are so hard that they will not give their Negroes any thing, but rather let them dye for Hunger.”

In times of distress, especially those of drought, flooding, or starvation, obeah men would have been expected to aid and protect their clients. And indeed, the summer of 1756 was one of the most opportune times for baptism. But conditions did not improve – nor did Caries ever mention that he tried to provide food for his congregants – and it is likely that many baptized slaves grew skeptical of Caries’ ability to improve their lives.

The missionaries’ inability to protect their congregants from other whites was likely a second reason for their decreased popularity. During one of Caries’ sermons in 1758, the missionaries’ powerlessness was laid bare by the appearance of a white man who forced an enslaved woman out of the Moravian worship meeting. Rauch, one of the newly arrived missionaries, recorded that “there was again a great disruption from the white people, who were shameless. Amos [a baptized slave] tried to stop it. But they already had the young negro woman by the skirt and wanted to pull her out.”

While Rauch only gave a few clues as to what was happening, Caries was more detailed in his description:

The negroes were disrupted by the white people, who stood by the window and the door and one of them stuck his hand through the screen and winked to a girl who he had forced to be his whore, telling her that she should come out of the Meeting. When she refused, he stuck his hand in the door and pulled her out by the skirt.

Despite the fact that Caries was in the midst of the sermon, he was unable to take control of the situation. In fact, Amos, a baptized slave, was the only person who actually tried to aid the woman. Even Rauch, who was sitting with the congregation and witnessed the
entire event, did not stand up to the white intruder. By failing to confront the white man, Caries and Rauch demonstrated that they did not control even their sacred space of worship.

A third reason for the missionaries’ declining influence was a dispute between Caries and Rauch about when an enslaved baptismal candidate could and should be baptized. Rauch, who had extensive experience in the Native American missions of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York, was shocked when he saw how “un-Christian” Moravian practice had become in Jamaica. In a series of letters to Spangenberg in Pennsylvania, he reprimanded Caries for being too lax in bestowing baptism to those who were obviously still engaged in “heathen” practice. Caries, for his part, seemed more willing to accept non-European traditions into his practice of Christianity. With both Caries and Rauch arguing their perspectives to Spangenberg in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, it took years for their disagreement to be sorted out. But by 1759, Rauch had won and Caries was sent back to Europe in shame. Rauch’s refusal to bestow baptism was a third important factor in the failure of the Jamaica mission. By withholding all sacramental offerings to the slaves, the missionaries made themselves less accessible and less valuable to their congregants. And as the missionaries became more stringent, their “converts” eventually stopped visiting them. In 1760 and 1761, missionaries at the Bogue often reported that they had no congregants come to their meetings. Eventually, the missionaries abandoned the post for other estates.

Caries’ rise and fall as obeah man in Jamaica suggests that obeah applied not just to Afro-Caribbean practitioners, but to anyone – European or African – who displayed an ability to perform certain functions. These functions included healing the sick; mediating affairs between masters and slaves or within the slave community; communicating with supernatural powers; and dealing in the symbolic worlds of death and dying. Once a practitioner failed to perform these tasks, however, he or she was at risk of losing his or her title and the community’s respect.

Perhaps most significantly, while most Europeans identified obeah as a distinctly Afro-Caribbean practice, which they contrasted to “civilized” European religion and medicine, the evidence from Caries’ letters and diaries suggest that Afro-Caribbeans viewed European religion as a form of obeah. In other words, while most whites attempted to create categories for obeah that placed it outside of acceptable European practices, the enslaved men and women at the Bogue estate in Jamaica integrated Caries and his religion into their category of obeah. When he failed to live up to their expectations and standards, he lost his standing both within the enslaved community and within the Moravian Church.

Acknowledgments
I am indebted to Vincent Brown, Kristen Block, Richard Dunn, David Hall, Jerome Handler, Eva Payne, Caitlin Rosenthal, Jon Sensbach, and Thomas Wickman for their advice and suggestions at various stages in the development of this article. I am also grateful to the participants at a variety of venues where I presented earlier versions of this essay: the Warren Center Seminar on “Transnational America from Above and Below”; the McNeil Center’s Brown Bag Seminar in 2010; the 2010 Bethlehem Conference on Moravian History & Music; the 2011 AHA Panel on “The Influences of Slavery on Colonial Christianity”; and the FEEGI conference in February 2014. Finally, I would like to thank Kelly Wisecup, Toni Jaudon, Randy Browne, and the anonymous reviewer at Atlantic Studies for their helpful comments and edits.
Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes
5. All of the German Script manuscripts cited in this article have been translated by the author. The majority of these sources can be found in the Unitätsarchiv der Evangelischen Brüder-Unität in Herrnhut, Germany (UA). Others are in the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, PA (MAB), and the Moravian Church House in London, England (MCH).
6. A handful of scholars have examined the Moravian records from Jamaica, but most have examined only the English-language records and none have examined Caries’ tenure in depth. For histories of the Moravian Church in Jamaica, see Buchner, *The Moravians in Jamaica*; *The Breaking of the Dawn*. Richard Dunn has also written about the Moravian mission to Jamaica, though he focuses on the Mesopotamia Estate beginning in 1760. See Dunn, *Moravian Missionaries at Work in a Jamaican Slave Community*.
7. For the argument that obeah had positive connotations in pre-emancipation Jamaica, see Bilby and Handler, *Enacting Power*; Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 41. For the conflict between “obeah” and European categories such as religion and medicine, see Paton, “Obeah Acts”; Paton and Forde, *Obeah and Other Powers*; Wisecup, “Knowing Obeah.”
17. Wisecup, “Knowing Obeah.”
21. The Moravian Church, also known as the Unitas Fratrum or Brüdergemeine, was a small but influential Protestant group headquartered in Herrnhut, Saxony. Known for their radical views on gender, community, and worship, the Moravians were also the first Protestant group to actively evangelize to enslaved Africans in the Caribbean. For their radical views on gender and community, see Fogleman, Jesus Is Female; Atwood, Community of the Cross. For their role as missionaries in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, see Sensbach, Rebecca’s Revival.
22. Caries spoke English, but it was likely accented. He wrote primarily in German, and his English writing contains minor errors typical of a German speaker.
23. In 1753, Barham wrote to Cennick, “[I would like to] communicate my thoughts to you upon a point in which you cannot with myself but be deeply interested, I mean the enlightening those poor souls, the Negroes in that part of the World where Providence has cast my show of temporal Blessing…” Moravian Church House Library (Hereafter MCH), London, England, AB 75, Missions Box.
26. Ibid.
27. Ward, The Protestant Evangelical Awakening; Fogleman, Jesus Is Female.
29. Caries, “Diary,” 1 January 1755; 13 January 1755. MCH [uncatalogued].
32. Dayfoot, The Shaping of the West Indian Church, 1492–1962; Beasley, Christian Ritual and the Creation of British Slave Societies, 1650–1780.
33. Atwood, Community of the Cross; Fogleman, Jesus Is Female; Engel, Religion and Profit.
34. Caries, “Diary,” 18 December 1754. MCH [uncatalogued].
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 19 December 1754.
38. Ibid., 23 December 1754.
40. Bilby and Handler, “Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life,” 155. See also Handler, “Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, Circa 1650 to 1834.”
42. Ibid., 26 January 1755.
43. Frey and Wood, Come Shouting to Zion; Sensbach, Rebecca’s Revival.
44. Caries, “Diary,” 9 March 1755. MCH [uncatalogued].
45. Handler argues that “plantation medical care … overwhelmingly applied to working slaves and children with the potential to grow into productive laborers … Whites generally showed little interest in the lame, elderly, or otherwise incapacitated, although these attitudes varied among individual slavemasters and by time period.” Handler, “Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, Circa 1650 to 1834,” 58.
47. While obeah has negative connotations in the modern Caribbean, Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby have argued persuasively that it most likely had positive connotations among Afro-Caribbeans in the eighteenth-century British West Indies. Handler and Bilby, “On the Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah’ in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean”; Bilby and Handler, “Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life”; Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power.
48. Stewart, Three Eyes for the Journey, 41.
50. Ibid.
52. “Candidaten zur Tauffe at the Bogue Im Monath Aug: 1756”; also “A List of Negeroos Belonging to Wm Foster Esq Taken the First of May 1756.” UA R.15.C.a.2.4.
53. Caries only baptized men. There were no women baptized until Anna Rauch, the first female missionary on Jamaica, arrived in December 1756. I discuss this gender dynamic at greater length in the next section.
References


