“[Obeah] Ṙọịa by Igbo Spelling:”\(^1\) Affirming the Value of *After God is Dibia* by John A. Umeh

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the demonization of Africana Religious Traditions (ARTs), peoples of African descent, in shame and ignorance, and seduced by the benefits of a ruthless capitalist Christianity, fail to affirm the value of their ancestral spirituality. In Jamaica and other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean, the word “Obeah”, a label for African spirituality, remains misunderstood, demonized, and criminalized as Christians consistently thwart any effort to value it. *Dibia*-Professor Umeh’s spiritual oeuvre provides necessary redress to the epistemicide that fuels the continued criminalization of “Obeah”. This article presents John Umeh’s *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria*, Vols. 1 and 2 as performative texts that affirm traditional African Priesthood as honorable, valuable, and necessary, while negating the myth of a superior white male god and consequent female inferiority. I explore these acts of writing the Igbo *Dibiahood* as sacred performances of testimony, communion and redemption. The emphasis on *Dibia* ethics, I posit as offering a critique of Christian priestcraft. African defined *Ọbịa* rejects eurocentric impositions on the term by affirming it as a healing vocation and inclusive priesthood defined by wisdom and knowledge. Through attention to the feminine space of revival, *Ọbịa balmyard*, I explore similarities with continental antecedents and present female *Dibiahood* as a radical faith tradition that insists on the power of Nne Agwu, Mother Holy Spirit. The respell of *Ọbịa* through eight emanations is shown as a potent antidote against epistemicide. By affirming the sacredness of matriarchal power, the dignity of traditional *Dibiahood* and the ethical force of traditional knowledge, Umeh exemplifies a priest class worthy of the name.

KEYWORDS

Obeah, African traditional religion, women’s spirituality, *Dibia*, *Ọbịa*, Reparations

Introduction:

In Jamaica, “Obeah,” (English spelling) remains criminalized under The Obeah Law of 1898. “Obeah” was first criminalized in Jamaica in 1760 by an “Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves” and

this Act, that was “also to prevent their possessing arms and ammunition, and going from place to place without tickets”,2 added religious persecution to physical and psychological bondage. Generally misunderstood and stigmatized in the Anglophone Caribbean, the term “Obeah” is attributed to any engagement with African spirituality and viewed largely as the practice of spiritual malevolence. The call for decriminalization, attendant to a more nuanced understanding of the term, is negated by Christian zealots and a corresponding lack of political will. Even against the backdrop of a Reparations Movement advocating for “religious engagement” programs to “neutralize the void created by slave voyages and the forced destruction of the history and culture”,3 Obeah continues to be condemned by eurocentrism. The ingrained hostility and official reluctance to take African spirituality seriously is not only indicative of the retardation of the Africana mind by its most recent brutal encounter with racist Europeans, but also, paradoxically, signals the need for a non-secular, Afri-oriented approach to understanding. This need for a continental African cosmological lens exponentially increases the value of authentic representations of African traditional religions (ATRs) to the post-slavery islands of the Caribbean. Accordingly, I articulate an Igboan rendering of Ọbịa as remedy for the epistemicide occasioned by Eurocentrism. This paper presents John Anenechukwu Umeh’s After God is Dibịa: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria Vols. 1 and 2 as performative texts that affirm traditional African Dibịahood as honorable, valuable, and necessary while negating the myth of a superior white male god and consequent female inferiority.

The oeuvre of Dibịa Professor, John A. Umeh, provides for an understanding of Ọbịa within the context of Igboan knowledge-craft. Using Igbo traditional religion as a gateway to Ọbịa makes Africana Obeah more accessible and understandable, allowing us to positively recognize Obeah, which constitutes “respelling Obeah”. Additionally, respelling Obeah allows for scholars of Africana religion to formulate a theology of Ọbịa, bringing it out

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2 The Act, which was drafted late 1760 after the end of the Tacky Rebellion, became effective on June 1, 1761. The section on “Obeah” reads in part, “And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah Men and Women.” See Acts of Assembly.

from the underground and the realm of negative invisible into the visible sacred. Apart from affirming the value of traditional Igbo spirituality, this privileging of an Igbo-African understanding of Ọbịa offers insight into the virtue of a gender inclusive priesthood, equally affirming woman as the first Dibịa/Ọbịa, Ọbịa as the original Goddess Religion, and its revolutionary existence in the diaspora as a radical religious faith tradition. Furthermore, an objective focus on Ọbịa affords a recognition of Dibịa as the existential ground of human existence, that is, a becoming that calls African women of faith away from the struggle for a place of honor in phallic steepled towers back to the future of an African sacred science that posits the supreme being Chukwu Abịàmà as an androgyne force of knowledge and wisdom and testifies that the Holy Spirit, Nne Agwu, is female.

Some 250,000 Igbos, the largest number of Igbos transported to any colony, came into Jamaica by way of the British slave trade of Africans. The comparative lack of discrete retentions coupled with conventional focus on Coromantee/Akan has overshadowed the Igbo contribution to Afro-Jamaican culture. This paper focuses on the continental Igbo conception of Ọbịa as an expatriate Dibịa, coupled with attention to Africana Ọbịa as understood by enslaved Africans in pre-treaty and pre-emancipation Jamaica, and by twenty-first century practitioners with whom I communed during fieldwork. The seminal works attended to in this paper, in addition to personal conversations with Dibịa Umeh, have been instrumental in shaping this presentation of “Ọbịa by Igbo spelling”. The paper is equally guided by questions posed by Revival Modda V (now deceased), a Kingston practitioner, who urged me to return to the community and make known my research findings. She expressed frustration with her own ignorance of her inherited tradition, noting that her practice was inadequate because her knowledge was incomplete. We proceed, therefore, not with a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the texts, but by showing how valuable the texts are in answering some of the basic questions about Ọbịa. Modda V insisted that, within the construct of Ọbịa as both powerful healing and spiritual malevolence, there must be some coherent objective understanding that can be embraced with courage and not fear, with pride and not self-loathing.

What can we truthfully tell our children when they ask, “What is Ọbịa?” “Why is it spelt and pronounced in different ways?” “How is Ọbịa related to Spirit

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4 See for example, Chambers, Murder at Montpelier and https://www.slavevoyages.org.
and the types of healing that women do?”. These questions from the diaspora provide the framework for an evaluation of Dibịa Umeh’s work as a cultural custodian and mediator between worlds. It is for Modda V and others like her that these volumes are written. It is these genuine seekers, whose inheritance is a fractured tradition, who will find value in Umeh’s offering of an occult philosophy written in coded language with the answers hiding in plain sight along the seams of contradictions and subtleties. The volumes will help Africana practitioners understand why, even in their inadequacy, they are called Ọbịa and why in pre-Christian Igboland, they would be “Dibias and potential Dibias”.

“For Dibias and Potential Dibias”5

In my first conversation with Prof Umeh about the two-volume exposition, he was emphatic about his intended audience; “Claudette, these books are written for Dibias and potential Dibias; they are not novels”.6 In this sentence lies the significance, uniqueness, and value of After God is Dibịa. In these volumes, we have, for the first time, an authoritative twentieth century continental account of Ọbịa, written by a Dibịa/Ọbịa for Ndị Dibịa. Umeh is an expert who defines the word and affirms the tradition:

My case study is Igbo Dibia into whose membership I was duly admitted since 1947… after undergoing the rigours and disciplines that go with it after due authentication of requisite spiritual selection.7

The Dibịa writes “as an African who is deeply involved in and firmly committed to traditional African knowledge and wisdom that predated and ushered in written history as well as post literacy … into the world”, and not “as a pretentious African who is writing to please his doubting foreign master”.8 The authority of After God is Dibịa is declared in the statement: “I have written what I am permitted to write down”.9

Written for Dibias and potential Dibias, the two-volume exposition of Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria is generally

5 “Dibias” is the Anglicized version of “Ndị Dibịa”, the plural form of Dibịa.
7 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:ii
8 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:ii.
9 Ibid, 1:iii.
inaccessible to the uninitiated or Óféké. The writing, previously forbidden, becomes necessary with the rapid and significant loss of traditional knowledge caused by epistemicide. In bemoaning the unrelenting epistemicide, Dibịa Umeh reiterates that the books are meant for decades-long serious study, stating that “one has to read the books over and over again to begin to get the meaning” (emphasis mine). The Dibịa as a cultural custodian, places his tradition within the realm of the sacred sciences and the necessary unveiling as cultural preservation and transmission. This writing for Ndị Dibịa is not academic, nor is it for academics or meant to entertain. Rather, the books’ contents are “well-kept and jealously guarded secrets of Igbo Dibijas from the very beginning of times”. Therefore, the books are primarily codexes meant, not only to document ancient wisdom, but also to complement modern initiations. In citing the primacy of traditional oral culture as post-literacy, Umeh more than hints that his necessary scribal treatment of Qbija, as an artefact of the Euro-American literary tradition, is a regression and, as such, makes an already challenging subject more difficult. In this writing by Dibịa for Ndị Dibịa and potential Ndị Dibịa, Umeh writes for Igbos at home and abroad and is substantiated in his office as a cultural custodian.

In two volumes, twenty chapters and an author’s preface, we get more than a glimpse of holistic living before European impoverishment. The volumes begin with a statement of truth, “Ézí Ókwú bụ Ndụ/Okwu asị bụ ọnwụ” (“Truth is Life/Falsehood is Death”) and ends with a maxim, “A na-esi n’anya Dibja àfụ M̄ mụọ” (“One sees the Spirit through the Dibịa’s eyes”). Citing the works as a necessary and conscious marriage of “arts, sciences, technology, metaphysics, occult, philosophy, cosmology, literature, ogwu, music, poetry, cosmogony, and so on”, Umeh treats fundamental aspects of Igbo culture including the Igbo Traditional Calendar or Ôgúafọ Igbo (Ch. 7), “Afa Divination: Ákpukpalá/Ugülí” (Ch. 10), and “The Language of Prayer” (Ch. 15). The intimate relationship between Dibịa (Ch. 4), Agwu (Ch. 5), and Chukwu (Ch. 6) is explained as fundamental, with cover images of both volumes being coded representations. Various elements of Dibịa medicine, such as water (Ch. 12), herbs (Ch. 13), and breath (Ch. 19), are treated. The first volume, compiled of six chapters, discusses major conceptual foundations and the second volume, presenting fourteen chapters,
addresses cultural practices. After outlining “Igbo Experts and the place of Dibja” in Chapter 3, Umeh gives a detailed representation of Dibja in Chapter 4 while “Igbo Humour concerning Dibja”. “Dibja’s Feats”, and the “Ethics of Dibja” are treated in Chapters 16, 17, and 20 respectively. These five chapters, specifically, relate to Ndị Dibja and provide a wealth of previously unavailable information.

Detailed explanations of numbers reveal their metaphysical nature as cosmic codes. Indeed, nature is conceived of as the greatest teacher with truth being inseparable from nature itself. The human life cycle is defined in terms of Olisa, the mystical tide of the universe, where kalma-kalma (karma) is the balancing energy. The advent of the patriarchal age and the dominance of one ethnic group over another is considered part and parcel of Olisa. Within this construct, we are advised to operate with tolerance, to “live and let live”, allowing every bird to perch. Igbo traditional culture renders our journey on earth a holiday from spirit land or pure consciousness, and our purpose, the be-coming of our best self, is rendered as a quest for God’s name. In Chapter 11, the “Traditional Recipe for Longevity & Good Health” is described in poetic terms:

If your mouth doesn't kill you  
if your throat doesn't kill you  
if your penis doesn't kill you  
you are sure to achieve longevity  
attain very old age and wear age-cataract.¹²

In Chapter 8, “AFA Mystical ‘O’ and the Early Achievement of Post Literacy in Igboland”, the Dibja corrects the misconception that the Igbos were an illiterate people before colonization. Asserting that more than 18 modes of writing “clearly establish the Igbo people as a very early highly literate society able to read and write using their traditional methods”,¹³ Umeh teaches us the words “Ide”, which means to write, and “Ikwu” which is to programme.¹⁴ We are further challenged to engage with the fact that expertise in “Ikwu

¹³  Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 2:56.
writing system … catapulted the Igbo people and their civilisation into the post-literate which the computer is today trying to launch other races”.15

The indispensability of music to healing is captured in the title of Chapter 14, “Égwú Ọgwụ (Ọgwụ Music)” or medicine music. “Songs, chants, incantations, dances, vocals, instrumentals, humming, whistling”, 16 are examples of sounds that play a major role in the work of Ndi Dibja, and the chapter offers lyrics as well as stories of musical healing. The Igboism, “Music, my Chi and I came together/Music, my Chi and I will go back home together”, 17 renders sound a divine force and mystic principle of planetary life. The subject of evil is treated in Chapter 18, entitled “Evil Forces and Evil Ones”. In this short, four-page chapter, Umeh rescues “Ekwensu… the beautiful one” 18 from demonization. We are assured, unequivocally, that Ekwensu is not the devil as was originally translated by European orthographers. Stating that, “it is indeed a ridiculous absurdity for any Igbo person to talk of Ekwensu as a devil or an evil spirit”, 19 Umeh allows us to praise Ekwensu as “the beautiful one at rest”, “the expeller of evil spirits”, “the giver of oracles”, and “the beautiful eagle”. “Confirmed to be one of the benevolent lunar deities, 20, akin to Khonsu/Thoth of Egypt, Ekwensu is, in esoteric terms, the “Child of the God of Light”. 21 The discrediting of the mistranslation and now accepted definition of Ekwensu as the devil exposes the entrenched epistemicide occasioned by European colonization. In providing Igbo-riginals in the form of prayers, greetings, chants, kola-nut communion, jokes, and the Ọfọ staff of truth, which kills the liar, Umeh insists on the value of non-Christian modes of spirituality and exposes the inadequacy of Christian praxis.

Umeh’s offering of knowledge and wisdom is also a testimony to the sacredness of the pre-colonial value system (Omenala). Umeh offers us knowledge of Dibja as mystic traveller and sacred sojourner, one who comes and goes, and does not proselytize about a savior, but rather, works to be that savior for suffering humanity. He restores the traditional value of Ọbiya,

15 Ibid, 2:56. 
16 Ibid, 2:137. 
17 Ibid, 2:137. 
18 Ibid, 2:196. 
19 Ibid, 2:197. 
20 Ibid, 2:197. 
21 Ibid, 2:197.
offering pre-Eurocentric meanings and praxis. Ọbịa practitioners in the Diaspora whose cultural and spiritual practices were considered devil worship will find merit in Umeh’s disclosure of continental antecedents to their practice. The sentence, “the Igbo Dibia surfaces in America and the Caribbean as Obeah (Obia by Ig(b)o spelling)” affirms the Dibia in his role as mediator and redeemer. The books are the existential middle ground that, in their self-reflexivity, wrest Ọbịa from the tyranny of Eurocentrism and redeem its value to and for Africana. Through Umeh, we learn that the word “Ọbịa”, in continental Igbo worldview, is a person and not a practice. Furthermore, we learn that the Ọbịa person is a Dibia on a healing mission. We understand that the Dibia is considered next to God and that one cannot be Dibia (enlightened) without Nne Agwu (The Mother Holy Spirit). We learn that the tonality of the Igbo language renders four basic meanings to a single word, confirming the sacredness of the Igbo language as tetragrammaton. And finally, we learn that After God is Dibia, and that the Ọbịa is a Dibia who says “mbịa / mbịa ọgwụ” (meaning, “I come / I come with medicine” or “I am coming / I am coming with medicine”).

The Person, Ọbịa by Igbo Spelling

When an Igbo Dibia is said to have gone on Ọbịa or Mbia / Mbia Ọgwụ it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her Dibia profession in another land or society.

It is an uncontested fact that “the Igbo Dibia [was] established in the Caribbeans (and America) as Obia man (spelt “obeah” by the English)” Less known is that “Obia [is the] Igbo name for a Dibia who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands”. In Igboland, Nigeria, Ọbịa translates to mean visitor, guest, and/or stranger and is simultaneously a way of saying “he/she/it has come”. The verb “bịa” means to come. The article “O”, conceived as a mystical pronoun, references everything in existence, that is, both human (s/he) and non-human (it). “Onye Ọbịa” means “the one who comes”. Because the act of arrival at one place necessitates departure from another, “bịa” is also implicitly understood as meaning “to go”. The term is

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22 Umeh, After God is Dibia, 1:80.
24 Umeh, Igbo People, 28.
also used to denote entertainment, “Kà m nee ya Ọbịa”/“Let me entertain him”, and visitation, “Enwèlụm onye Ọbịa”/“I have a visitor”. Synonyms of note are the terms “alien” and “stranger”, “sojourner” and “traveler”. For the itinerant Dibịa, his/her journeying constitutes a mission, that is, it is the conscious choice of one who has been sent for. The person Ọbịa goes because he/she has been asked to come. In the early records from Barbados, we learn that “no Negro…can doe anything of this [Ọbịa], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros”. While Ndị Dibịa apprentices may have ended up on slave ships, Umeh notes that the comings and goings of Dibịa was achieved by mystical travel. He cites mystical travel as common among Ndị Dibia, stating that it has been practiced from “very ancient times when Dibịa vast in the knowledge and practice of mystic travellings of ikwu ekili or ikwu eli or ide nde or ibi ibuo went to various parts of the world to provide services to suffering humanity”. These mystic travels of the Ọbịa are recorded in the legends of the flying Africans. The frequent sea voyages, mystic travels, and high death rate that characterized plantation slavery meant that, for enslaved Africans/Igbos, the world of plantation slavery was Ọbịa and the Dibịa as Ọbịa was not only the person coming to help them, but also the person who had expert knowledge in the comings and goings on the land and planet earth.

This is the meaning of Dibịa as a shortened form of Dibiala and references the Dibịa in his role as a cosmic engineer and astrologer and an expert in

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26 See Williamson, 2006.
29 See Usuanlele 2016.
30 Umeh, Igbo People, 29.
land/estate management. Dibiala is one “who has a deep knowledge and skills of holding a land and its people for peace and growth”. Dibiala is a healer ascribed with the power and authority to welcome and direct the things of the land through rights of kinship cohesion fecundity and progress. The suffix bia from di then means ability to welcome and direct events, life courses and order of a society.

 Ndị Dibịa, in their mastery of knowledge and wisdom, operate with God-like omniscience and omnipotence with a sole injunction: a prohibition against changing destiny. It is said that Dibia áhá-ágwo Önatalu Chi/Dibia does not cure or solve fate or destiny. These varied descriptions of Ndị Dibia “connotes more than medicine and healing, they were the elites and intellectuals who held and guarded the knowledge base of the Igbo people”. Igbo traditional society was divided into Dibia and Óféké (non-Dibia) and this emphasis on knowing as the paramount human faculty rendered it more than a divine attribute, therefore, “After God is Dibia”.

Dibia comes after God in Igbo culture because in the most literal sense, “bia” is derived from Abiama, the word for God or the Supreme Being: “The Igbos call (God) Abia Ama, that is, the Knowledge and the Wisdom that reveals Himself”, they call Dibia “the Adept or Master of Knowledge and Wisdom”. Abiama is also Chukwu Abiama, the Great Spirit (Chi-Ukwu) of Revealed Knowledge and Wisdom and "Chukwu welu Olu Dibia/After God is Dibia”. The highest conception of the Dibia is as one who is “in possession of, [and] an adept in occult, esoteric, recondite and hidden knowledge and

32 Umeh notes that Dibia as an Academic has a distinguished career in matters of the land: “He has pioneered in the establishment of degree and postgraduate programs in Estate Management in Nigeria as well as in the establishment of a Faculty of Environmental Studies at the University of Nigeria.” He has "served several terms as Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, and several terms, as Head of Estate Management". See The Igbo People.
33 Iroegbu, “Igbo Medicine.”
34 Ibid.
36 “Himself” is used by the author for convenience.
37 Umeh, After God is Dibia, 1:76.
Ndị Dibịa is defined primarily in terms of cognition, that is, they are the embodiment of, and experts in knowledge and wisdom. In terms of spirit, they can see the invisible. It is explained that “Dibịa is made-up of two words Di and Abịa meaning the Master of or the Expert in Knowledge and Wisdom”. Umeh describes the profession of Ndị Dibịa as a “Knowledge-Craft” and offers sacred science as cognitive science. Ndị Dibịa is defined not just by the possession and embodiment of knowledge, but by a particularly singular approach or use of this knowledge, which is to reveal it. Such revelation is, in turn, deemed Ọgwụ (medicine defined as the ultimate solution), substantiating the aphorism “knowledge is medicine”. In this sense, we may call Ndị Dibịa gnostic revealers and within Igbo cosmology, this special faculty constitutes an identification with God.

The terms, “priest”, “doctor”, and “healer” that are often used to reference Dibịa are shown to be inadequate. In particular, a priest of the Christian faith is understood to be one of the three orders of ordained ministry whose chief role is to offer sacrifice. Additionally, in terms of hierarchy, a Christian priest is not “next to God”, but, rather, is positioned between the Bishop and Deacon. Importantly, a Christian priest lacks spiritual power; their vocation stems from knowledge of one written book and their ability to expound on its contents. Western worldviews undermine the ability to grasp concepts encoded in asụṣu Igbo, resulting in much of Igbo being lost in translation. For this very reason, the very first words of After God is Dibịa state that Dibịa is “a terminology which does not have an English equivalent”. In emphasizing the absence of an English equivalent to Dibịa, the cultural custodian reminds his peers of the holistic nature of Dibịa work. He cautions them to resist the strict categorization that frames Western worldviews:

38 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:i.
39 Ibid.
40 See Stravinskas, Catholic Encyclopedia, 781.
41 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:i.
42 This non-equivalence is seen in the demotion of Zacharias Caries, the first Moravian Missionary to Jamaica, who was initially called Obea, but lost this designation when he was unable to stop the rape of congregants by the slavocracy and failed to alleviate hunger during a period of famine. Monk Lewis, a planter-priest, in commenting on the enslaved’s disinterest in Christianity, confessed in his diary entry of March 22, 1816, that “indeed, I am afraid that 1 am indebted for the chief part of my present auditory to my quality of massa rather than that of priest.”
To call [Dibịa] a traditional Doctor is to straitjacket him or her…To call Dibịa a herbalist is to pick up a drop from the Ocean and call it the Ocean. Similarly, calling the Dibịa a psychologist or healer or destroyer of witches or mender of bones or any such single or a group of activities, would fall seriously short of the full meaning. Dibịa is holistic and so is knowledge and wisdom. They have no end…

Dibịa is identified with the invisible air and the ancestral masquerade. Dibịa is the one who, with the help of Nne Agwu, is able to achieve “expertise in several fields of endeavour simultaneously”. Ndị Dibịa, as the source of medicine, Ogwụ, or the ultimate solution, “controlled all facets of socio-political, economic, cultural, religious, moral or spiritual life of the people and individuals or groups”. The holistic knowledge that informed the oracular nature of Dibịa work became imperative for enslaved Africans.

In Chapter Four, entitled “Dibịa”, Umeh opens the world of Dibịa. It is world of masked knowledge, of mysterious norms; a world unattainable to the mundane mind and closed to the materialist; a world defined by the mastery of things invisible. It is a world attended by axioms such as: “Ọnu Dibịa, bụ Ọnu Mmụọ, the mouth of the Dibịa is the mouth of the spirit”; “Dibịa bụ Agbara, Dibịa is a god”; “A na-esi n’anya Dibịa afụ Mmụọ, One sees the Spirit through the Dibịa’s eyes”; “Dibịa bụ Ikuku amaro ebe isi ya na ọdụ ya dị, Dibịa is the air or wind in the universe of which no one can fathom the head or tail”; Atọsaa mmanwu afu Mmụọ; Dibia is a Spirit masquerading in human flesh”; “Dibia aha-agwo Ọnatalu Chi/Dibia does not cure or solve fate or destiny”. We learn that “Dibia dị n’ahụ/Dibia is in the body” meaning that Dibia’s “makeup is spiritual and physical”, he/she being “born with special abilities and faculties”. The high office of Ndị Dibịa is gender inclusive and throughout his works, Umeh shows great reverence for female Dibiases.

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43 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:74.
44 An ancestral masquerade is called “Jonkonnu” in Jamaica.
45 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:74.
46 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:75.
47 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:76-77.
48 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:86.
49 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:81.
50 Umeh, After God is Dibịa, 1:81.
The specialness of Ndi Dibia, of which there are two major types, is to be found (among other attributes) in a triad of extrasensory perception, namely: potent eyes, ifị uzọ; potent hand, Aka ile; and potent mouth, Ọnụ Àtụ.\(^{51}\) The Dibia’s potent eyes allow for extraordinary vision. His/her potent hand effects healing and makes Ọgwụ /holistic medicine. The potent mouth of Ndi Dibia speaks Truth as the literal word of God. Of great importance is the relationship of Ndi Dibia with Nne Agwụ, the Holy Spirit, for the Dibia is someone chosen and possessed by Agwụ, the Holy Spirit, and Dibia classification is determined by Agwụ. The two types of Dibia are Nne Agwụ Ndi Dibia (Mother Agwụ Dibia) and Ebo Agwụ Dibia (Lineage Dibia). A Lineage Dibia is one who attains the profession through inheritance. This can be through either or both his or her maternal and paternal line and can lead to specialization in one or more aspects of Ọgwụ. Mother Holy Spirit Ndi Dibia are those chosen by her to become Dibia, usually through some form of spirit possession and/or recognized significant events.

The holistic functions of Ndi Dibia are of two classifications: Ọgwụ (medicine) and Aja (sacrifice). An appreciation of the fact that “what kills, saves, and what saves, kills”\(^{52}\) (a well-known Igbo axiom), is central to grasping the ten aspects of Igbo traditional medicine. Nine aspects may be understood as positive and/or neutral, while the tenth, “Ikọ Nsị /Ikụ Nsị or the firing/shooting of psychic missiles or occult poisons”, is more equivocal. It is the Ikọ Nsị aspect of Igbo traditional medicine that is considered negative. Agha Ọgwụ or war medicine, which allows for flight, invisibility, bullet-deflection, and increased speed (among other manoeuvres), includes the use of Ikọ Nsị. These “psychic missiles or occult poisons” are the weapons of revolt used by Ndi Ọbịa against the slavocracy in the cause of freedom and came to define the entire profession as “Obeah.” However, the following aspects form the bulk of the practice:

1. Igba Afa (Divination including oracles and prophecies)
2. Ịnye Ọgwụ (herbal medication)
3. Igba Ọkpụkpụ (orthopaedic practices)
4. Ichụ Àjà (sacrifices and propitiation)
5. Iku Ume Udu (breathing the breath of life)

\(^{51}\) Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:81.
\(^{52}\) Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:87.
6. *Ime or Igwọ Ọgwụ* (mystical, occult and magical feats and practices)  
7. *Iha ma ọ bụ iji Mmili* (control of weather and seasons)  
8. *Nkukwụpụ* (magical batting off)  
9. *Nkpọkwapụ* (spiritual knocking over or knocking off)

The above practices are conducted within the context of selflessness and respect, of holding Ọfọ, and Omenala, and an oath taken by

the *Dibịa* to abide strictly by ethical principles of live and let live, not only in his or her relationships with fellow *Ndị Dibịa* but also in the handling of clients, clients' problems and then in the handling of all that exists in the universe.53

Umeh emphasizes that addressing various forms of evil is

not child's play...you have to have thorough knowledge of them, of how to handle, control, or stop them, control and stop evil acts; you cannot cure or control or stop something you don’t know about.54

This ability to know good and evil is part of the very definition of *Dibịa*. This divine faculty of *Ndị Dibịa* is encapsulated in the epigram “Ọgwugwọ nyịá m, ọkụkụ nyịá m, abuzịkwọ m, Dibịa?” which asks, “If I am unable to offer saving services or negative services of releasing psychotronic missiles, what then would be the basis for my answering [to the name] Dibịa?”.55 By this statement we come to understand why *Obia* is known as both powerful healing and spiritual malevolence in Jamaica. It is often said that “one man’s meat is another man’s poison”, and for the slavocracy, *Obia*’s potency was bitter poison for their dehumanizing greed. For *Ndị Dibịa*, the power to both heal and harm comes with *Alo*, the staff of heavy responsibility. Additionally, the refrain *Ọfọ na Ogu* endorses *Ọfọ Dibịa*, the *Dibịa*’s staff of office (by which he stands firmly on truth, justice, and fairness), to follow Ogu, esoterically “a branch of forgiveness”.

The work/s of offering, “saving services or negative services of releasing psychotronic missiles”, is determined by one’s spiritual house or lineage and

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54 John Umeh, Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, October 2023.  
55 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa*, 2:264
“the important thing to know is that one should follow one of the two major divisions of Dibija work”. Because of the cosmic nature of the work, those Ndị Dibịa who are called to do Iko Nsị or Iku ọgwụ are required to “make love to the ground”. This injunction from participation in normal family life ensures the sacredness of the tradition, because “whosoever action results in subsequent punishment of relations and posterity is not a good Dibịa.”

Those that follow ọkụkụ in the days gone by were compelled by ethical principles to undergo the public ritual of iso utu ana/poking the land (earth Deity) with their penis after which they will neither marry nor procreate. To ensure non-procreation they may, for example, be forced to pull one mystic root (Obala náàbọ) in such a way as to pull it to break at its heart-tube (óhú yá) after which there is no way they can ever procreate.

Among other things, access to natural law (Omenala) along with the trinity of staffs (Ọfo, Ogu, Alo) allows for the determination of truth and right action. The post-Christian notion of the “problem of evil”, imported by foreigners, is non-existent for the traditional Igbo Dibịa who embodies the fundamental principle of “live and let live”. Balance is guaranteed by keeping both spiritual and earthly laws. Igboan justice declares, “Kite should perch/Eagle should perch/Anyone who says the other should not perch/should suffer automatic violent loss of its own wings”. Using Ịkụ Ọgwụ and Agha Ọgwụ (battle/war medicine) against those who refused to let Africans live their lives as they deemed fit is justified in Omenala. In fact, it is inevitable. Using ọkụkụ ọgwụ (negative medicine) to define the person and practice of holistic Ọbịa is a metonymic falsehood that sanctions the evils of British slavery. Umeh’s oeuvre allows us to correct these epistemic lies.

This writing of Igbo culture from within is a necessary critique of foreign writers as well as indigenes who misrepresent the culture. The epistemicide and cultural degradation caused by British slavery and colonization of traditional cultures has necessitated the regression to written documentation

56 Ibid, 2:264.
58 Umeh, After God is Dibja, 2:264.
59 Ibid, 2:244.
of post-literate cultures. With colonized Igboland’s forced embrace of Christianity and the diaspora’s continued struggles with affirmation of the signifier “Obeah,” the restorative volumes are a welcome communion with current and future custodians. Dibias and potential Dibias in Jamaica today will recognize themselves in Umeh’s distillation of their profession (Ọbịa Working), in positive and negative medicine, and as a journey sanctioned and supported by Nne Agwu, Mother Holy Spirit. “Journeying in the Spirit” as part and parcel of “Working Ọbịa” is, hereby, affirmed. Umeh’s work is invaluable for reminding us that the original Holy Spirit is female, that Nne Agwu is the Holy Spirit of Ọbịa. The Dibia profession is always a be-coming. It is the Ọbịa that is the existential ground of human existence. It is the Ọbịa that is the first Dibịa, the first trinity, identified with the Holy Spirit, the divine feminine.

**Nne Agwu, sacred scars in bushes and Balmyards**

Agwu is referred to as nne agwu which would literally mean mother holy spirit, the supreme queen of society and eternity and the ruler of everlastingness. *Nne Agwu* in Igbo is the totality of Agwu, that is the original and complete Mother Holy Spirit.61

This divine feminine energy that journeyed with enslaved Africans manifested itself on the island of Jamaica as revolutionary resistance. This “supreme queen of society”, Agwu, was ever present on the battlefield, her army of freedom fighters incurring sacred scars in the war against the patriarchal epistemicide. For female Ndị Ọbịa, coming to help meant giving birth to new ways of being female and free. Her potent eyes would have to see her people through countless horrors. Her potent hands make new medicines and her sacred tongue speak in new tones. Within the confines of patriarchal terrorism, her insistence on the relevance and power of the Spirit produced innovative spiritualities that bear the scars of their torturous journey. We, therefore, articulate Ọbịa as a radical faith tradition, and further as the Black woman’s first radical faith tradition in the Anglophone Caribbean. When Africana thinks of radical women’s faith, we must begin with the existential battleground of miserable slavery, where women in bushes and on battlefields mothered, fostered, healed, and protected by being and becoming experts in knowledge and wisdom. We must include

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those women who continue to practice as outlaws in the balmyards of Jamaica and similar spaces. The revolutionary power of Ọbịa, as an embodiment of Nne Agwụ, the Mother Holy Spirit, transported holistic healing practices that continue to energize Dibias and potential Dibias. In Jamaica, positive spiritual practice is associated with women, in part because the most famous Ọbịa known during the slave-era was a woman, Grandy Nanny of the Maroons.

Nanny of the Maroons was among the Ndị Ọbịa who came to Jamaica in the early 18th century. Of Akan descent, she freed herself and came to live among the Igbo-maroons in what is now the parish of Portland. Radical in her defiance of male authority and in her refusal to sign a treaty with the British that would doom her fellows on the plantation, Nanny became legend. Nanny also became the reference for female Ndị Ọbịa to be called mothers and the feminine practice as mothering. Grandy Nanny embodied the mysticism “Dibija di n’àhụ” (Dibija is in the body). Her make-up was both physical and spiritual, for the records state that she was able to repel bullets with her body. She was also skilled in the mystical use of herbs, using the famed three legged “Kongo Pot” to boil herbs that confused the enemy, causing them to detour away from Maroon settlements. Such examples of Igwo Ọgwụ (occult medicine) are part and parcel of the lives of female Ndị Dibia who are radically spiritual. At the end of the 19th century, colonizers described “Obeah” as running “like a black thread of mischief through the known history of the race”,62 acknowledging that “in former times [it was] as powerful an agent as slavery itself”.63 Nanny’s power and fame confirms women’s relation to the spirit and healing as understood through the lens of Nne Agwụ, and no less so because “women were the first Dibias on earth. Men became Dibias at the time of Afadu Gwionu/Taa-ìlé-ose-naabo [patriarchy]. Women were the first Dibias on earth and that is why it is very easy to admit women to Dibiahood”.64 As the first infamous female Ọbịa known to the British, Grandy Nanny confirmed and secured woman’s place in the technology of the Spirit and established female Dibiahood as a radical faith tradition.

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63 Livingstone, Black Jamaica, 19-21.
64 Personal conversation.
Within the context of British terror, Africans converged around their mothers’
tongue and appealed to the original goddess religion, Ọbịa, “with the most
implicit Faith, upon all occasions”. As Umeh says, one comes having been
called to help. Enslaved African’s call for help produced a movement and a
mission. “Come to help us Ọbịa” in its holism was military intelligence, herbal
skill, divination, mediation, magic, and neutral mystical power. 65 For over
100 years, until the advent of George Liele and Spirit Baptism, enslaved
Africans’ sole recourse for healing knowledge and wisdom was Ọbịa. The
eight major emanations of Ọbịa in Jamaica 66 are radical faith traditions
defined by spirit nomenclature. Kromanti, Myal, Christian Myal, Kumina,
Revival, Mpokominya, Science, and Rastafari all represent Nne Agwụ’s
response to her children’s cries for help. These innovative spiritualities bear
the scars of wounds inflicted by starvation, overworking, whipping, rape,
torture, and the habitual crucifixion of Ndị Dibia. Emanations of Ọbịa are in
fact “radicalities of Spirit” that testify to Nne Agwụ’s ability to birth new forms
of consciousness.

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From continent to islands, from 1517 when the first enslaved Igbos arrived on the island, through the Calabar Maroons establishment of Kromanti to present day Rastafari, Afro-Jamaicans have put their faith in *Ndị Dibịa*. While Kromanti/Maroon *Ọbịa*, initially a powerful site of resistance, was later co-opted by the British, post-emancipation Jamaica gave birth to Revival *Ọbịa* and the Revival *balmyard* as a revolutionary site of healing and protection. In this syncretic form of worship, Afro-Jamaicans adopted the famous *Dibịa* of the New Testament, willing the “journeyman Jesus” to travel with them into the new reality of a free society. Freedom from physical chains necessitates different mothering skills that use the *Obe* (cross) of Jesus to mask *Nne Agwu*, the Holy Spirit of *Ọbịa*.

Today, in the twenty-first century, Jamaicans continue to access the omnipresent power of *Nne Agwu*, for, according to Modda V, “if a man have a money and trouble tek him; him a reach out to *Ọbịa*”.67 One way of reaching out to *Ọbịa* is by visiting the Revival *balmyard*, a place where the spirit is continually worked. When Nanny of the Maroons fought the British, *Ọbịa* was not yet outlawed and Christianity was unknown. Shared beliefs allowed for ease of practice and organic development within a hostile environment. Today, descendants of these first Afro-Jamaicans “reach out to *Ọbịa*” in secrecy out of fear of ridicule and imprisonment. Gradual changes in the conceptual environment occasioned by the adoption of “journeyman Jesus” have not prevented Jamaicans from accessing fundamental *Ọbịa*. It is their faith in “The Spirit” that propels them to more holistic solutions, solutions that value the African worldviews while negotiating patriarchy, imagined democracy, and gross capitalism. The practice of “Balm” necessitates an identification with the Spirit and this identification is a source of pride among Jamaican *Dibịas* and potential *Dibịas*.

For Modda V and other twenty-first century female *Dibịas*, the quest for “The Spirit”, variously understood, constitutes a form of desperation. Modda V, in addressing the fundamentals of Revival Balm states, “everybody desperate for the Spirit…Ah telling dem dat it’s better to walk Christ-like dan to have di Spirit. But everybody waan Spirit, having di Spirit give dem heights and fame”.68 The heights and fame achieved by access to “The Spirit” results from the Spirit’s omniscience that offers an endless flow of experience and

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68  Modda V, interview.
information. Having spiritual experience/s is highly valued as it almost always leads to important disclosures that positively impact the lives of individuals and their communities. In Revival "Obja" parlance, spiritual experiences lead to “higher heights and deeper depths”. Within Revival consciousness, faith is defined in terms of the Spirit, where faith and Spirit are one: “faith...is like di breeze- dats Spirit – nuh matter how yuh see di tree big and di branch dem big – di breeze move it. So yuh live by faith – di Spirit…”. This identification of faith with Spirit’s power to move things, to change things, explains the desperation to “live by The Spirit”. Spirit, for Revival "Obja" and their patients, is not an abstraction. She is a radical, an activist, and her name is Faith.

Rejection of Christian faith by refusing the admonition to walk Christ-like evidences the urgent need for solutions. In noting that “spirituality and healing are associated with women in Jamaica”, Wedenoja maintains that, “Jamaicans say that ‘Balm’ and Revivalism have greater spiritual power including the power to heal, than other religions. The nominal churches are commonly said to be spiritless, lacking in healing power”. In the Balmyards I visited, and among female practitioners I interviewed, “spirit talk” dominated. My interview with Mother Jones in rural Jamaica left me feeling impoverished. She looked at me with such pity and spoke with an intense regret that I had not experienced “The Spirit”, nor heard it speaking “expressly”. Mother B, in eastern St. Andrew, alerted me to her middle/upper class clients as evidence that her clients spanned the social spectrum, exclaiming afterwards, “you would be surprised who believe in Obja”. The belief in Obja guarantees a robust international clientele of both Jamaicans and non-Jamaicans who visit annually to get their “spiritual check-up”. “Balmyard tourism” is one of Jamaica’s open secrets and the balmyard tourist accesses all services of the local Dibja, foremost among them, the spiritual bath and “cutting and clearing” rituals.

Within the feminine space of the balmyard, we find many of the practices indicated by Dibja Umeh. Cultural continuities include the use of the crossroads, counteraction rituals, and seals/sigils (writings/drawings with Nzu or white chalk). The prolific use of water, herbs, and music/dancing is

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69 Ibid.
70 Wedenoja, “Mothering”, 89.
71 Ibid. 86.
evident everywhere and spirit-talk is ubiquitous. As in Igboland, the silk cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) is indispensable for certain types of *Dibịa* work and may feature in Initiations. *Balmyard* work is called “working The Spirit”, and Modda V described her vocation as strict obedience to the Spirit: “I’m a slave to the voice that speaks to me”. The use of secret codes, hidden in gestures, proverbial language, and clothing, protects healers and healing knowledge from “those who should not know”. Continued use of the astrological tetramerogram is seen in the observation of quarterly rituals/festivals, of which the annual Watt Town Spring gathering is the most celebrated. The call to *Dibjahood* is the same as in Igboland, either by lineage or by possession of *Nne Agwụ*. Refusal to obey one’s calling results in either, or both, physical and mental illness. Whereas on the continent, the forest figures prominently in Initiations, in the island diasporas one generally becomes “slain in The Spirit” on the “mourning ground”. It is here, laying the physical mother earth, that the Spirit teaches the adept. Knowledge is imparted through various means, including dreams, visions, visitations, and voices. These downloads of information are central to self-knowledge and future practice. In these initiations, the space of the mourning ground is considered a school; referenced in biblical terms as “Bethlehem School Room” and/or “Jerusalem School Room”. Spiritual education may also take place “inside” *Ceiba pentandra*, as mentioned above. There is a commonsense approach to the Christian Bible that figures prominently in Revival Balm. It is not the only “holy book” used and, moreover, women’s intuition, spirit messages, and orders are privileged above written words.

The Revival Modda is mother to the entire community and, while cleansing rituals dominate the landscape, the androgyne Modda is also a tower of psychological and emotional support. A supreme empath, the Spirit allows her to feel the patient’s pain and she holds healing services to allow the Spirit to work in a communal space. Thanksgiving “tables” are celebrations of success created by the Spirit that allow for people to dance and journey in the Spirit. The atmosphere of the *balmyard* is generally one of peace and tranquility where many people report being healed by just being present in the spiritual ambience. The physical, emotional, and psychological wounds inflicted by violent enslavement and ruthless capitalism has left both visible and invisible scars. Stated in simple terms, “people are suffering” and, according to Modda V, her “working the Spirit” to alleviate this suffering is

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72 Modda V, interview.
indifferent to mundane legalities. “You have to help people!” says Modda V and the indignities suffered while providing medicine are wounds that leave sacred scars on the mind and body of Ndi Dibja.

If criminalization is our deepest wound, then it continues to leave the biggest scars. Perhaps the most radical aspect of Revival Obia practice is the assistance given to persons who run afoul of the law. The appeal to Omenala/Odinani or natural/God’s law, takes precedence over mundane laws. In explaining why she helped with court cases, Modda V cited the history of the island and the injustice system that, for her, constitutes a litany of confusion. Modda V has a spiritual sanction against working for those who commit murder, irrespective of the reason. She adheres strictly to this injunction even though her empathetic nature makes her partial to young people, who are prone to go astray. “I’m not supposed to work on court case, but when the people come, I feel sorry for them”, says Modda V, pointing to an altar with Tarot cards. Her “Tarot Tower” of court cases is proof that Ndi Dibja can sometimes “beg di Spirit a favor”. Prohibitive demonization is a wound Obia continues to nurse with both hands and without ritual protection for family and progeny. Within this sacred tradition, scarred by criminalization, the manifold powers of Nne Agwu wrestle with those who would enforce common laws.

Revival Balm is a complex system of workers of varying “powers” that are accessed as needed. Patients are referred to different “specialists”, many of whom have expertise in court cases. Difficult court cases are usually handled by Science Obia, and these practitioners, usually men, are experts in ọkụkụ ọgwụ. These men, who are said to work with “both hands”, are revered and feared. It is their vocation that has led to a perceived gender division in Obia practice. In short, it is said that “men kill and women heal”. Although Modda V practices positive medicine, she sometimes refers patients to practitioners of ọkụkụ ọgwụ. She, however, laments what she terms the “spoiling” of Revivalists who leave to practice Science. The ability of Science Obia to send psychic missiles, perform psychic surgery, and provide a variety of “guards” against various evils ensures them clientele from the armed services. Members of the judiciary, being in the line of fire of

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73 Modda V, interview.
74 Also called ‘deLawrence’ from William Lauron de Laurence, author of The Great Book of Magical Art. His books are said to be used extensively.
psychic missiles, also frequent Ndi Dibia. The irony of law enforcement and members of the judiciary (judges, police personnel, lawyers in particular) accessing the powers of Ọbịa, an outlawed practice, speaks not only to the continued relevance of Ọbịa, but also to the tenacity of Afro-centric worldviews. It is a testament to the success of Nne Agwu’s Ọbịa Mission.

In The Promised Key, the founder of Rastafari Ọbịa, Leonard Howell, writes in praise of the balmyard: “a Balm Yard is not a Hospital neither is it a obeah shop”.76 His critique of the commodification and desacralization of Ọbịa, originally a Mission and had by the early 20th century become known as spiritual malvolence, is scathing. For Howell, it was not just that Ọbịa was identified with gross negativity, but, rather, that the society produced and reproduced this evil. Jamaica was a factory, a manufacturer of evil. He declared war on the “black and white heart Obeah Factory” in which fallen Angels wreak havoc with their “deadly poisonous indomitable lying tongue[s]”.77 Inspired by his revolutionary forbears, Howell made Rastafari Ọbịa the greatest anti-colonial movement in Jamaica and, in so doing, declared war on epistemicide. In affirming the practice of Balm and the feminine space of the balmyard, Howell acknowledged and resisted the desacralization of our ancestral lineage, that is Nne Agwu. Notwithstanding the double-edged sword of historical records producing a litany of confusion, Howell, in founding the last emanation of Ọbịa, and formulating a new language, “dreadtalk”, fostered the Spirit to respell “Obeah”. The spell ỌBỊA is a positive site/sight of resistance and Ọbịa’s eight Emanations are the works of the Spirit: sacred, scarred, and radical.

**Respelling “Obeah”: Against epistemicide by law and literacy**

Epistemicide is the deliberate act, behavior, exercise or crime...calculated, concerted, and systematic destruction...of an

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77 Howell, The Promised Key, 13.
Western educated scholars have spent centuries working to define Obia. Notwithstanding the latest attempts to explain away the worldview(s) that doomed millions of Africans, the fact of the matter is that the Act of 1760/1761 is an act of epistemicide. The formal literization and definition of Obia in Western terms that occurred with this law constituted a singular attempt to erase the intellectual tradition of West-Central Africa. Moreover, it sought to deprive enslaved Africans of lineage, language, and culture. With this criminalization of African thought and practice, despite the later syncretism of African spiritualities with Christianity, there is still measurable fear, hatred, and non-acceptance of African-centered beliefs and practices that are viewed as ugly and backward. This self-loathing, which masquerades in Academia, in Christianity and other favored spaces as intelligence and forward thinking, is a form of profound ignorance. This sad state of affairs is the very essence of epistemicide whose “lasting effects transmutes into internalized replicable self-destruction of the intellectual heritage of the society…the destruction becoming self-sponsoring, self-propelling and self-promoting”.

The epistemicide committed against Africans is an iniquity almost impossible to combat, but the fundamentality of Obia is self-protecting. It creates in Ndị Dibịa, and potential Ndị Dibịa, a desperation for the Spirit that, for them, is the very definition of knowledge. In this sense, respelling Obeah is an act of re-education, remembering, and re-knowing.

This Igbo-centric Obia is important for distilling (from the cacophonic negation) a single intellectual tradition that is accessible. While elsewhere in the non-anglophone Caribbean, discrete retentions of pre-Christian African traditions are available, this is not the case for descendants of those enslaved by the British, of whom it was said, “No Country exceeds them in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods by which they put

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them to death”. 81 This severe cruelty was supported by “clergymen themselves [who] were often among the most immoral in the island”. 82 During slavery, “the established Anglican church in Jamaica represents, perhaps, the most disgraceful episode in the history of that institution”. 83 The slavocracy, in their own words, admitted that the inhumane conditions of enslavement produced a “multitude of occasions which...provoked the Negroes to exercise the powers of Obi against each other”. 84 Against this chronicling and ownership of the corruption of the African and African spirituality, it was further observed that enslaved Africans “have a kind of occasional Conformity, and join without Distinction in their solemn Sacrifices and Gambols” 85 (emphasis mine). Universal adoption of the term Obia in this strange hostile environment 86 confirms a singular belief in the fundamentality of spiritual power expressed in regional and dialectical variations. For example, we recognize in the word Obia the linguistic convergence of Akan cognates: krabea (intellectual gift), Obi (somebody/person), and hybea (destiny); Bakongo Nzambi (God), jumbi (ancestral spirits), mbiya (charm/medicine). The different spellings of Obia record the slavocracy’s attempts to capture the polyphony of West-Central African cognates denoting concepts associated with expertise, knowledge, medicine, and spirit. The different pronunciations are indicative of the intonations of different ethnic groups and their creolized descendants.

82 Orlando Patterson. *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica*. (Rutherford [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), 47. See also Leslie (1740:43) who upon visiting Jamaica was moved to report that “the Clergy here are of a character so vile, that I do not care to mention it; for except a few, they are the most finished of our Debauchees”.
83 Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, 47.
85 The term also occurs in non-British colonies. For example, in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana), “Each village has its own obia osu (obia houses) – shrines devoted to different classes of gods and spirits”. See Bilby (1993:18). In Igbo Obi a means “this house” and “Osu means people dedicated as slaves to service of a deity, or whose ancestors were so dedicated”. As such, “the son of an Osu is an Osu. Moreover anyone who is proved to have had contact with an Osu also becomes an Osu”. See Williamson, 264. This caste system has however been abrogated by law in Nigeria.
While demonization by British enslavers led researchers on a quest for West-Central African words confirming negative aspects of medico-spiritual practice, the Dibia custodian, with his “potent mouth”, has allowed for an understanding of the Igbo tones, Obya and Dibia, as fundamental self-reflexive polymorphs that demonstrate the human will to be within the context of dehumanizing Christian terror. The fundamentality of “biya” as meaning both “to come” and “knowledge and wisdom” is related to its demonstrative forms: “Obi a” denoting “this mind”, “this will”, “this heart”, “this house”, and “this boy”. Furthermore, while Di biia is expert/husband of knowledge and wisdom and master of the land, intoned differently as Dj/biya, the literal meaning is be/come. The tonality of post-literate languages is evidence of their primordial and fundamental nature. This primordiality fosters the continental African belief and practice of living as welcome guests on planet earth.

Notwithstanding West-Central cognates, Umeh’s ouevre clues us to, what he terms, “the March of Igbo Civilization” and the intimate linguistic relationship between language of enslaver and enslaved and the commonality of the “bi” morph within English itself. While there is no English equivalence in terms of a Dibia profession, there is in terms of Dibia, of beings, of common humanity. It should be obvious to those who are listening, that the sound/tone “bi” (be) has the same meanings in English. Our common humanity is the occult equivalence of Obya in English. We are beings, coming and going to and from earth and travelers upon the earth. Everyday Igbo-English words related to beingness, life, and knowledge include the bibliography that is a vital part of academic papers. The biography that describes one’s life, the obituary we craft when a life ends, and the biology we call a life-science. Terms such binary, bible, obelisk, bytes are also English cognates of Dibia/Obya. I make a point about the English cognates of Dibia/Obya because Western education systems trace the etymology of English words to Latin/Greek and elide the Egyptian African sources. In Introducing Africana philosophy, Henry encourages us to engage in a radical linguistic archaeology. When this is done, Africana again, finds itself as source and model.

88 See Bewaji “Indigenous Knowledge Systems” and “Liberation Humanities for Africa and the Diaspora.”
Obia, by Igbo spelling, puts “di I” in Obeah. Respelling “Obeah” begins with replacing the “e” with “di I”/the self as all selves. Putting “di I” in Obia confirms our ancestral heritage, our own human experience as knowing beings. The “I” as an esoteric symbol of beingness and manifestation, represents the human journey of becoming Qbía. As a representation of the merger of journey and knowledge, Qbía is an ideographic celebration of post-literacy with diacritics symbolizing the sacred scars on mind and body. The Spell Qbía is an ideograph of the affirmative Spirit, of the positive sound and sight. Qbía promises a return to Omenala and the AFA Education System, the first “dot-come”, an organic binary system of biologic intelligence. The Spell Qbía bears battle scars of triumph over epistemicide and signals a new time of knowledge reparations. This unearthing of the Igbo mother tongue as source and vehicle for the expression and experience of African spirituality in the Anglophone Caribbean is the spirit “speaking expressly” of a Dibía diaspora. It is a Dibía diaspora shaped equally by Black women’s potent voices expressing the primordial intellect. The sound/s of “Qbía” is the African orality defying European literacy. It is the sound/s of Black women’s bodies and Black women’s lives as sacred texts against epistemicide.

Conclusion:
The British slave trade in Black bodies rendered matriarchy, and any insistence on Black humanity and equality, radical. Qbía’s enduring existence and revolutionary ethos negates the falsehood of patriarchal White supremacy, challenges the lies about Africa and Africana spirituality, and critiques the continued criminalization of indigenous knowledge systems in the Anglophone Caribbean. The benefits of an African sacred science for Africana Christianity, in general, and Africana women of faith, in particular, may be seen in the organic radicality of a matriarchal space where the supreme being, Chukwu Abịamà, defined by knowledge, is both female and male, and where the Holy Spirit, Nne Agwụ, is female. Re-engagement with

89 [Obeah] Obia by Igbo spelling represented phonetically is [oo-bee-yah]: The first two syllables are long with the last syllable “ah” being short. In the case of Obia respelt Qbía [oh-bi-a], all the syllables are short.

90 Rasta talk and the basic tenet of all traditional knowledge systems. See Pollard Dread Talk. Rastafari’s concept of “I and I” is similar to Akan “because you are, I am” and Mayan “I am another yourself”.

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and affirmation of these, our own traditions, where women are equally free to occupy positions of power and to be positively androgynous, is important for women of color who are serious about spiritual empowerment and service. The value of traditional Igbo spirituality lies in its call for a return to the first becoming. It is a coming to terms with Ndị Ọbịa radicality, a radical female tradition that appeals to the cosmic laws not Eurocentric ones, and where women’s knowledge and intuition replaces biblical affirmations.

Umeh’s four-fold performance of Offering; Testimony, Communion, and Redemption insists on the redundancy of the terms “Obeah man” and “Obeah woman”. Ọbịa is a woman, man, and spirit. Ọbịa is a person, and a power, and a person with healing power. Ọbịa as Dibịa is a travelling healer who journeys in and by the Spirit. When our children ask, “what is Ọbịa?”, we can now answer with confidence that it is the intellectual tradition of our continental forebears, our very own system of knowledge. When our children ask, “what is Ọbịa?”, we can teach them that before enslavement and epistemicide the correct question would be, “who is Ọbịa?”. We can affirm for them that Ọbịa is a chosen one who, with knowledge of both positive and negative medicine, practices one or the other. While our ancestors’ use of Agha Ọgwụ against the slavocracy was, for us, a positive good, the slavocracy’s prohibition was our biggest wound. In the 21st century, our continued criminalization Ọbịa, our African ancestral heritage, is our biggest scar.

In conclusion, the two volumes of After God is Dibịa achieves their stated purpose in showing us that “what Dibịa is, has, knows, does...[constitutes] fundamental and far-reaching contributions of the black man to ancient and modern world civilizations”. Dibịa Umeh, in his mediation of a matrifocal healing tradition, provides a firm anchor for Dibias and potential Dibías. Ọbịa practitioners in the diaspora now have a place from which to affirm themselves, their tradition, and their future. By building “bridges of belonging” that allow for both local/national and inter-African Reparations, Umeh’s Ọbịa-working is constitutive of the African Knowledge Program advocated by the Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC). More than “religious engagement”, it is a potent form of “psychological rehabilitation”, a beneficent psychotronic missile against epistemicide. Even within the

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https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricom-10-point-reparation-plan/
context of the spiritual terror that characterized the race to steal and possess *ala* (land), *onye Qbja* was a participant and observer, insisting on the endlessness of being, defying, and being defiant, constituting a radical woman’s faith tradition, calling again for revolution, casting a re-spell, and reminding us that we are always be-coming…God. *Onye Qbja* is calling on us to embrace our divinity and be proud Africans. *Onye Qbja*’s radical example is calling on us to decriminalize Obeah and “tell the children the truth”.  

*Obja*  
The Healer  

To revolt is to take your healing in your hands.  
To heal is to embrace divinity:  
To see God and  
Become what you have seen.  

*Obja Om*  
*Obja Qm*  
*Obja Om*  

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93 Gerald Eze, “*Obja: The Healer.*” An Ode to Jamaican *Ndî Dîbja* by *Qkwa Qja* (the flute master). There is an intimate relationship between the flute master and *Dîbja*. Umeh defines *Qkwa Qja* as a mystic who “helps mystics and *Dibjas*”. See Vol. 1:72. For Eze, the extra-musical *Qja* “is the connection between the world of the Igbo ancestors and the world of the living…the rallying point between the new Igbo and the authentic Igbo spirit”.
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“[Obeah] Obja by Igbo Spelling:” Affirming the Value of After God is Dibja by John A. Umeh
