

“[Obeah] *Ọbija* by Igbo Spelling:”¹ Affirming the Value of *After God is Dibia* by John A. Umeh

Claudette A. Andersonⁱ

SHORT BIO

ⁱClaudette A. Anderson, Ph.D. is Executive Director and Professor of *Ọbija* at Unuchi Foundation, an Afro-Atlantic Religious Reparations Resource nonprofit. Her research focuses on African indigenous systems of knowledge and African-derived religions in the Anglophone Caribbean.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Unuchi Foundation. Florida. USA.
claudette.andersoni@respellingobeah.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8297-6770>

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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 *Ọbija* 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, *Ọbija 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 *Ọbija* 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*, *Ọbija*, 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

¹ John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria*. Vol. 1 (London: Karnak House, 1997), 80.

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 *Obja* as remedy for the epistemicide occasioned by Eurocentrism. This paper presents John Anenechukwu Umeh’s *After God is Dibja: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria* Vols. 1 and 2 as performative texts that affirm traditional African *Dibjahood* as honorable, valuable, and necessary while negating the myth of a superior white male god and consequent female inferiority.

The oeuvre of *Dibja* Professor, John A. Umeh, provides for an understanding of *Obja* within the context of Igboan knowledge-craft. Using Igbo traditional religion as a gateway to *Obja* 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 *Obja*, bringing it out

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*.

³ Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC), 10 Point Action Plan. <https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan>/August 2, 2023.

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 *Ọbja* offers insight into the virtue of a gender inclusive priesthood, equally affirming woman as the first *Dibja/Ọbja*, *Ọbja* as the original Goddess Religion, and its revolutionary existence in the diaspora as a radical religious faith tradition. Furthermore, an objective focus on *Ọbja* affords a recognition of *Dibja* 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 steeped 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.⁴ 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 *Ọbja* as an expatriate *Dibja*, coupled with attention to Africana *Ọbja* 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 *Dibja* Umeh, have been instrumental in shaping this presentation of “*Ọbja* 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 *Ọbja*. Modda V insisted that, within the construct of *Ọbja* 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 *Ọbja*?”, “Why is it spelt and pronounced in different ways?”, “How is *Ọbja* related to Spirit

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 *Dibja* 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 *Ọbja* and why in pre-Christian Igboland, they would be "*Dibjas* and potential *Dibjas*".

"For *Dibjas* and Potential *Dibjas*"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 *Dibjas* and potential *Dibjas*; they are not novels".⁶ In this sentence lies the significance, uniqueness, and value of *After God is Dibja*. In these volumes, we have, for the first time, an authoritative twentieth century continental account of *Ọbja*, written by a *Dibja/Ọbja* for *Ndj Dibja*. 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 *Dibja* 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 Dibja* is declared in the statement: "I have written what I am permitted to write down".⁹

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

⁵ "*Dibjas*" is the Anglicized version of "*Ndj Dibia*", the plural form of *Dibja*.

⁶ John Umeh. Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, January 2022.

⁷ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:ii

⁸ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 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, *Dibja* 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 *Dibja* 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 Dibja* 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 *Dibjas* from the very beginning of times”.¹⁰ 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 *Ọbja*, 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 *Dibja* for *Ndị Dibja* and potential *Ndị Dibja*, 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 áfụ Mmụọ*” (“One sees the Spirit through the *Dibja*’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”,¹¹ Umeh treats fundamental aspects of Igbo culture including the Igbo Traditional Calendar or *Ògùàfò Igbo* (Ch. 7), “Afa Divination: *Ákpukpálá/Ugílí*” (Ch. 10), and “The Language of Prayer” (Ch. 15). The intimate relationship between *Dibja* (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 *Dibja* 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,

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 1:i.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 1:iii.

addresses cultural practices. After outlining "Igbo Experts and the place of *Dibia*" in Chapter 3, Umeh gives a detailed representation of *Dibia* in Chapter 4 while "Igbo Humour concerning *Dibia*". "Dibia's Feats", and the "Ethics of *Dibia*" are treated in Chapters 16, 17, and 20 respectively. These five chapters, specifically, relate to *Ndi Dibia* 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 *Dibia* 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

¹² John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria*. Vol. 2 (London: Karnak House, 1999a), 103.

¹³ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 2:56.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 2:56.

writing system ... catapulted the Igbo people and their civilisation into the post-literacy 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 Dibia*, 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 *Dibia* 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 *Ọbija*,

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. *Ọbja* 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 *Dibja* surfaces in America and the Caribbean as *Obeah* (*Obia* by Ig(b)o spelling)"²² affirms the *Dibja* in his role as mediator and redeemer. The books are the existential middle ground that, in their self-reflexivity, wrest *Ọbja* from the tyranny of Eurocentrism and redeem its value to and for Africana. Through Umeh, we learn that the word "*Ọbja*", in continental Igbo worldview, is a person and not a practice. Furthermore, we learn that the *Ọbja* person is a *Dibja* on a healing mission. We understand that the *Dibja* is considered next to God and that one cannot be *Dibja* (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 Dibja*, and that the *Ọbja* is a *Dibja* who says "*mbja / mbja ọgwu*" (meaning, "I come / I come with medicine" or "I am coming / I am coming with medicine").

The Person, *Ọbja* by Igbo Spelling

When an Igbo *Dibja* is said to have gone on *Ọbja* or *Mbia / Mbia Ọgwu* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibja* profession in another land or society.²³

It is an uncontested fact that "the Igbo *Dibja* [was] established in the Caribbeans (and America) as *Obia* man (spelt "obeah" by the English)".²⁴ Less known is that "*Obia* [is the] Igbo name for a *Dibja* who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands".²⁵ In Igboland, Nigeria, *Ọbja* translates to mean visitor, guest, and/or stranger and is simultaneously a way of saying "he/she/it has come". The verb "*bja*" 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 Ọbja*" means "the one who comes". Because the act of arrival at one place necessitates departure from another, "*bja*" is also implicitly understood as meaning "to go". The term is

²² Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 1:80.

²³ John Anenechukwu Umeh. *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area*. (Enugu, Nigeria: Gostak Print. & Pub. Co. 1999b), 28.

²⁴ Umeh, *Igbo People*, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

also used to denote entertainment, “*Kà m nne ya Ọbja*”/“Let me entertain him”, and visitation, “*Enwèlùm onye Ọbja*”/“I have a visitor”.²⁶ Synonyms of note are the terms “alien” and “stranger”, “sojourner” and “traveler”. For the itinerant *Dibja*, his/her journeying constitutes a mission, that is, it is the conscious choice of one who has been sent for. The person *Ọbja* goes because he/she has been asked to come.²⁷ In the early records from Barbados, we learn that “no Negro...can do anything of this [*Ọbja*], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros”.²⁸ While *Ndị Dibja* apprentices may have ended up on slave ships,²⁹ Umeh notes that the comings and goings of *Dibja* 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 *Dibia* 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”.³⁰ These mystic travels of the *Ọbja* 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 *Ọbja* and the *Dibja* as *Ọbja* 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 *Dibja* as a shortened form of *Dibiala*³¹ and references the *Dibja* in his role as a cosmic engineer and astrologer and an expert in

²⁶ See Williamson, 2006.

²⁷ John Umeh. Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, January 2022.

²⁸ Walduck quoted in Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby. “On the Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah’ in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean,” *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 22, no.2 (2001): 90.

²⁹ See Usuanlele 2016.

³⁰ Umeh, *Igbo People*, 29.

³¹ Patrick Iroegbu. “Igbo Medicine and Culture: The Concept of Dibia and Dibia Representation in Igbo Society of Nigeria.” Accessed January 18, 2018. <http://chatafrik.com/articles/health-and-welfare/igbo-medicine-and-culture-the-concept-of-dibia-and-dibia-representation-in-igbo-society-of-nigeria>.

land/estate management.³² *Dibiala* is one "who has a deep knowledge and skills of holding a land and its people for peace and growth".³³ *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.³⁴

Ndi Dibia, 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 Ọnatalụ Chi/Dibia* does not cure or solve fate or destiny. These varied descriptions of *Ndi Dibia* "connotes more than medicine and healing, they were the elites and intellectuals who held and guarded the knowledge base of the Igbo people".³⁵ 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 *Abjama*, the word for God or the Supreme Being: "The Igbos call (God) *Abia Ama*, that is, the Knowledge and the Wisdom that reveals Himself",³⁶ they call *Dibia* "the Adept or Master of Knowledge and Wisdom".³⁷ *Abjama* is also *Chukwu Abjama*, 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*.

³⁵ Nze Chukwukadibia Nwafor, *Leopards of the Magical Dawn: Science and the Cosmological Foundations of Igbo Culture*. Morrisville, NC, USA: Lulu Press Inc, 2014), 22.

³⁶ "Himself" is used by the author for convenience.

³⁷ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:76.

wisdom”.³⁸ *Ndi Dibja* 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 “*Dibja* is made-up of two words *Di* and *Abja* meaning the Master of or the Expert in Knowledge and Wisdom”.³⁹ Umeh describes the profession of *Ndi Dibja* as a “Knowledge-Craft” and offers sacred science as cognitive science. *Ndi Dibja* 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 *Ndi Dibja* 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 *Dibja* 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.⁴⁰ 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 *asụsụ Igbo*, resulting in much of Igbo being lost in translation. For this very reason, the very first words of *After God is Dibja* state that *Dibja* is “a terminology which does not have an English equivalent”.⁴¹ In emphasizing the absence of an English equivalent to *Dibja*,⁴² the cultural custodian reminds his peers of the holistic nature of *Dibja* work. He cautions them to resist the strict categorization that frames Western worldviews:

³⁸ Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 1:i.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See Stravinskias, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 781.

⁴¹ Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 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 I am indebted for the chief part of my present auditory to my quality of massa rather than that of priest.”

To call [*Dibja*] a traditional Doctor is to straitjacket him or her...To call *Dibia* a herbalist is to pick up a drop from the Ocean and call it the Ocean. Similarly, calling the *Dibia* 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. *Dibia* is holistic and so is knowledge and wisdom. *They have no end...*⁴³

Dibja is identified with the invisible air and the ancestral masquerade.⁴⁴ *Dibja* is the one who, with the help of *Nne Agwu*, is able to achieve "expertise in several fields of endeavour simultaneously".⁴⁵ *Ndi Dibja*, as the source of medicine, *Ogwu*, or the ultimate solution, "controlled all facets of socio-political, economic, cultural, religious, moral or spiritual life of the people and individuals or groups".⁴⁶ The holistic knowledge that informed the oracular nature of *Dibja* work became imperative for enslaved Africans.

In Chapter Four, entitled "*Dibja*", Umeh opens the world of *Dibja*. 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: "*Onu Dibja, bu Onu Mmuo*, the mouth of the *Dibja* is the mouth of the spirit"; "*Dibja bu Agbara, Dibia is a god*"; "*A na-esi n'anya Dibja afu Mmuo*, One sees the Spirit through the *Dibja*'s eyes"; "*Dibja bu Ikuku amaro ebe isi ya na odu ya di, Dibia* is the air or wind in the universe of which no one can fathom the head or tail"; "*Atosaa mmanwu afu Mmuo; Dibia* is a Spirit masquerading in human flesh";⁴⁷ "*Dibja aha-agwo Onatalu Chi/Dibja* does not cure or solve fate or destiny".⁴⁸ We learn that "*Dibja di n'ahu/Dibja* is in the body"⁴⁹ meaning that *Dibja*'s "makeup is spiritual and physical", he/she being "born with special abilities and faculties".⁵⁰ The high office of *Ndi Dibja* is gender inclusive and throughout his works, Umeh shows great reverence for female *Dibias*.

⁴³ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:74.

⁴⁴ An ancestral masquerade is called "Jonkonnu" in Jamaica.

⁴⁵ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:74.

⁴⁶ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:75.

⁴⁷ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:76-77.

⁴⁸ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:86.

⁴⁹ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:81.

⁵⁰ Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 1:81.

The specialness of *Ndi Dibja*, of which there are two major types, is to be found (among other attributes) in a triad of extrasensory perception, namely: potent eyes, *ifu uzọ*; potent hand, *Aka ile*; and potent mouth, *Ọny Ẹtu*.⁵¹ The *Dibja*'s potent eyes allow for extraordinary vision. His/her potent hand effects healing and makes *Ọgwụ* /holistic medicine. The potent mouth of *Ndi Dibja* speaks Truth as the literal word of God. Of great importance is the relationship of *Ndi Dibja* with *Nne Agwụ*, the Holy Spirit, for the *Dibja* is someone chosen and possessed by *Agwụ*, the Holy Spirit, and *Dibja* classification is determined by *Agwụ*. The two types of *Dibja* are *Nne Agwụ Ndi Dibja* (Mother *Agwụ Dibja*) and *Ebo Agwụ Dibja* (Lineage *Dibja*). A Lineage *Dibja* 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 Dibja* are those chosen by her to become *Dibja*, usually through some form of spirit possession and/or recognized significant events.

The holistic functions of *Ndi Dibja* 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, “*Iko Nsi /Iku Nsi* or the firing/shooting of psychic missiles or occult poisons”, is more equivocal. It is the *Iko Nsi* 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 *Iko Nsi*. These “psychic missiles or occult poisons” are the weapons of revolt used by *Ndi Ọbja* 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. *Inye Ọgwụ* (herbal medication)
3. *Igba Ọkpukpu* (orthopaedic practices)
4. *Ichụ Ẹjà* (sacrifices and propitiation)
5. *Iku Ume Udu* (breathing the breath of life)

⁵¹ Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 1:81.

⁵² Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 1:87.

6. *Ime or Igwo Ọgwu* (mystical, occult and magical feats and practices)
7. *Iha ma ọ bu lji Mmili* (control of weather and seasons)
8. *Nkụkwapu* (magical batting off)
9. *Nkpọkwapu* (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 *Dibja* to abide strictly by ethical principles of live and let live, not only in his or her relationships with fellow *Ndi Dibja* 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 *Dibja*. This divine faculty of *Ndi Dibja* is encapsulated in the epigram "*Ọgwugwo nyjá m, ọkụkụ nyjá m, abuzikwo m, Dibja?*" 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] *Dibja?*"⁵⁵ By this statement we come to understand why *Ọbja* 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, *Ọbja's* potency was bitter poison for their dehumanizing greed. For *Ndi Dibja*, the power to both heal and harm comes with *Alo*, the staff of heavy responsibility. Additionally, the refrain *Ọfọ na Ogu* endorses *Ọfọ Dibja*, the *Dibja'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

⁵³ Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 2:268.

⁵⁴ John Umeh, Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, October 2023.

⁵⁵ Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 2:264

“the important thing to know is that one should follow one of the two major divisions of *Dibja* work”.⁵⁶ Because of the cosmic nature of the work, those *Ndi Dibja* who are called to do *Iko Nsi* 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 *Dibja*.”⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

Among other things, access to natural law (*Omenala*) along with the trinity of staffs (*Ọfọ, 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 Dibja* 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”.⁵⁹ Using *Iku Ọgwụ* and *Agha Ọgwụ*⁶⁰ (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 *Ọbja* 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.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 2:248.

⁵⁸ Umeh, *After God is Dibja*, 2:264.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 2:244.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 2:215.

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. *Dibjas* and potential *Dibjas* in Jamaica today will recognize themselves in Umeh's distillation of their profession (*Ọbja* 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 *Ọbja*" 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 *Ọbja*. The *Dibia* profession is always a be-coming. It is the *Ọbja* that is the existential ground of human existence. It is the *Ọbja* that is the first *Dibia*, 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 *Ndi Ọbja*, 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 *Ọbja* 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

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 1:111.

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

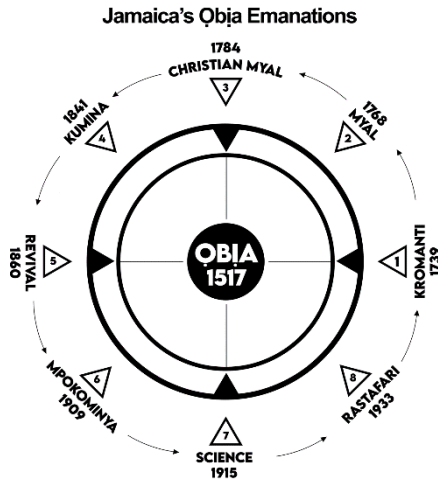
Nanny of the Maroons was among the *Ndi Ọbja* who came to Jamaica in the early 18th century. Of Akan descent, she freed herself and came to live among the Igbo-maroons in what is now the parish of Portland. Radical in her defiance of male authority and in her refusal to sign a treaty with the British that would doom her fellows on the plantation, Nanny became legend. Nanny also became the reference for female *Ndi Ọbja* to be called mothers and the feminine practice as mothering. Grandy Nanny embodied the mysticism "*Dibja di n'ahụ*" (*Dibja* 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 *Igwọ Ọgwụ* (occult medicine) are part and parcel of the lives of female *Ndi 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 Agwu*, and no less so because "women were the first *Dibjas* on earth. Men became *Dibjas* at the time of *Afadu Gwionu/Taa-lie-ose-naabo* [patriarchy]. Women were the first *Dibjas* on earth and that is why it is very easy to admit women to *Dibjahood*".⁶⁴ As the first *infamous* female *Ọbja* known to the British, Grandy Nanny confirmed and secured woman's place in the technology of the Spirit and established female *Dibjahood* as a radical faith tradition.

⁶² William Pringle Livingstone, *Black Jamaica: A Study in Evolution*. (London: S. Low, Marston and Co. 1899), 19.

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, *Ọbja*, "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 *Ọbja*" 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 *Ọbja*. The eight major emanations of *Ọbja* in Jamaica⁶⁶ are radical faith traditions defined by spirit nomenclature. Kromanti, Myal, Christian Myal, Kumina, Revival, Mpokominya, Science, and Rastafari all represent *Nne Agwu'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 *Ndi Dibia*. Emanations of *Ọbja* are in fact "radicalities of Spirit" that testify to *Nne Agwu's* ability to birth new forms of consciousness.



⁶⁵ See, Dianne M. Stewart *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005b.

⁶⁶ See Claudette A. Anderson, "Gnostic Obia from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari: A Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church." PhD diss., Emory University, 2010.

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 *Ndi Dibia*. While Kromanti/Maroon *Qbja*, initially a powerful site of resistance, was later co-opted by the British, post-emancipation Jamaica gave birth to Revival *Qbja* and the Revival *balmyard* as a revolutionary site of healing and protection. In this syncretic form of worship, Afro-Jamaicans adopted the famous *Dibia* 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 *Qbja*.

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 *Qbja*”.⁶⁷ One way of reaching out to *Qbja* is by visiting the Revival *balmyard*, a place where the spirit is continually worked. When Nanny of the Maroons fought the British, *Qbja* 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 *Qbja*” 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 *Qbja*. 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 *Dibjas* and potential *Dibjas*.

For Modda V and other twenty-first century female *Dibjas*, 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

⁶⁷ Mother P. Interview by Claudette A. Anderson. March 2007.

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...".⁶⁹ 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",⁷⁰ 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".⁷¹ 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 *Dibia*, 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 *Dibia* 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

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 *Dibija* 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”.⁷² 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 tetragram 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 Agwu*. 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 common-sense 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

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 Dibia*.

If criminalization is our deepest wound, then it continues to leave the biggest scars. Perhaps the most radical aspect of Revival *Obja* 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",⁷³ says Modda V, pointing to an altar with Tarot cards. Her "Tarot Tower" of court cases is proof that *Ndi Dibia* can sometimes "beg di Spirit a favor". Prohibitive demonization is a wound *Obja* 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 *Obja*,⁷⁴ and these practitioners, usually men, are experts in *okuku ogwu*. 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 *Obja* 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 *okuku ogwu*. She, however, laments what she terms the "spoiling" of Revivalists who leave to practice Science. The ability of Science *Obja* 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

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 Dibja*. The irony of law enforcement and members of the judiciary (judges, police personnel, lawyers in particular) accessing the powers of *Qbja*,⁷⁵ an outlawed practice, speaks not only to the continued relevance of *Qbja*, but also to the tenacity of Afro-centric worldviews. It is a testament to the success of *Nne Agwu's Qbja Mission*.

In *The Promised Key*, the founder of Rastafari *Qbja*, 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 *Qbja*, originally a Mission and had by the early 20th century become known as spiritual malevolence, is scathing. For Howell, it was not just that *Qbja* 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 *Qbja* 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 *Qbja*, and formulating a new language, “dreadtalk”, fostered the Spirit to repel “Obeah”. The spell Q̄B|A is a positive site/sight of resistance and *Qbja'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

⁷⁵ See Claudette A. Anderson. “Judge, Jury or Obeahman? Power Dynamics in the Jamaican House O’ Law.” Presented at conference *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, Newcastle University, July 2008.

⁷⁶ Leonard Howell. *The Promised Key. Introduced and Edited by E. S. P. McPherson*. (Brooklyn, New York: A&B Publishers Group. 2001), 11.

⁷⁷ Howell, *The Promised Key*, 13.

ethnic, racial, religious, or national group identity...through the negotiations of their indigenous knowledge systems...⁷⁸

Western educated scholars have spent centuries working to define *Obja*. Notwithstanding the latest attempts to explain away the worldview(s) that doomed millions of Africans,⁷⁹ the fact of the matter is that the Act of 1760/1761 is an act of epistemicide. The formal literization and definition of *Obja* 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".⁸⁰ The epistemicide committed against Africans is an iniquity almost impossible to combat, but the fundamentality of *Obja* is self-protecting. It creates in *Ndji Dibja*, and potential *Ndji Dibja*, 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 *Obja* is important for distilling (from the cacophonous 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

⁷⁸ Bewaji, John Ayotunde Tunde Isola. "Liberation Humanities for Africa and the Diaspora." Presented as An Inaugural Professorial Lecture. (University of the West Indies, Mona Kingston, February 19, 2015), 14.

⁷⁹ See Kelly Wisecup, "Knowing Obeah." *Atlantic Studies* 10, no.3 (2013): 1–20.

⁸⁰ Bewaji, "Liberation Humanities," 14.

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...provoke[d] 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 environment⁸⁶ 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.

⁸¹ Charles Leslie. *A New History of Jamaica: From the Earliest Accounts, to the Taking of Porto Bello by Vice-Admiral Vernon*. (London: Printed for J. Hodges), 39.

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.

⁸⁴ Bryan Edwards. *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. (London: printed for Crosby and Letterman; for Mundell and Son, Edinburgh; and J. Mundell, Glasgow, 1799), 169.

⁸⁵ Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica*, 306–307.

⁸⁶ 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 “*Òsu* means people dedicated as slaves to service of a deity, or whose ancestors were so dedicated”. As such, “the son of an *òsu* is an *òsu*. Moreover anyone who is proved to have had contact with an *òsu* also becomes an *òsu*”. 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, *Ọbja* and *Dibia*, as fundamental self-reflexive polymorphs that demonstrate the human *will to be* within the context of dehumanizing Christian terror. The fundamentality of "*bja*" 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 bja* is expert/husband of knowledge and wisdom and master of the land, intoned differently as *Di/bja*, the literal meaning is be/come. The tonality of post-literate languages is evidence of their primordial and fundamental nature. This primordially fosters the continental African belief and practice of living as welcome guests on planet earth.

Notwithstanding West-Central cognates,⁸⁷ Umeh's oeuvre 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 beingness, 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 *Ọbja* 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/Ọbja*. I make a point about the English cognates of *Dibia/Ọbja* because Western education⁸⁸ 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.

⁸⁷ Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*. (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2003), 352.

⁸⁸ See Bewaji "Indigenous Knowledge Systems" and "Liberation Humanities for Africa and the Diaspora."

Obia, by Igbo spelling, puts “di I” in Obeah.⁸⁹ Respelling “Obeah” begins with replacing the “e” with “di I”/the self as all selves.⁹⁰ 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 *Ọbja*. As a representation of the merger of journey and knowledge, *Ọbja* is an ideographic celebration of post-literacy with diacritics symbolizing the sacred scars on mind and body. The Spell *Ọbja* is an ideograph of the affirmative Spirit, of the positive sound and sight. *Ọbja* promises a return to *Omenala* and the AFA Education System, the first “dot-come”, an organic binary system of biologic intelligence. The Spell *Ọbja* 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 *Dibja* diaspora. It is a *Dibja* diaspora shaped equally by Black women’s potent voices expressing the primordial intellect. The sound/s of “*Ọbja*” 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. *Ọbja*’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 Abjàmà*, defined by knowledge, is both female and male, and where the Holy Spirit, *Nne Agwu*, 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 *Ọbja* [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”.

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 *Ndi Qbja* 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". *Qbja* is a woman, man, and spirit. *Qbja* is a person, and a power, and a person with healing power. *Qbja* as *Dibja* is a travelling healer who journeys in and by the Spirit. When our children ask, "what is *Qbja*?", 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 *Qbja*?", we can teach them that before enslavement and epistemicide the correct question would be, "who is *Qbja*?". We can affirm for them that *Qbja* is a chosen one who, with knowledge of both positive and negative medicine, practices one or the other. While our ancestors' use of *Agha Qgwu* against the slavocracy was, for us, a positive good, the slavocracy's prohibition was our biggest wound. In the 21st century, our continued criminalization *Qbja*, our African ancestral heritage, is our biggest scar.

In conclusion, the two volumes of *After God is Dibja* achieves their stated purpose in showing us that "what *Dibja* is, has, knows, does...[constitutes] fundamental and far-reaching contributions of the black man to ancient and modern world civilizations". *Dibja* Umeh, in his mediation of a matrifocal healing tradition, provides a firm anchor for *Dibjas* and potential *Dibjas*. *Qbja* 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 *Qbja*-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",⁹¹ a beneficent psychotronic missile against epistemicide. Even within the

⁹¹ Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC), 10 Point Action Plan.
<https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan/>

context of the spiritual terror that characterized the race to steal and possess *ala* (land), *onye Ọbja* 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 Ọbja* is calling on us to embrace our divinity and *be* proud Africans. *Onye Ọbja's* radical example is calling on us to decriminalize Obeah and "tell the children the truth".⁹²

Obja
The Healer⁹³

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 Ọm
Obja Om

⁹² Bob Marley and the Wailers. "Babylon System." Survival. Tuff Gong. 1977.

⁹³ Gerald Eze, "*Obja: The Healer.*" An Ode to Jamaican *Ndi Dibia* by *Okwa Oja* (the flute master). There is an intimate relationship between the flute master and *Dibia*. Umeh defines *Okwa Oja* as a mystic who "helps mystics and *Dibias*". See Vol. 1:72. For Eze, the extra-musical *Oja* "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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