

RELIGION OF THE SLAVES

(Close this window to return to the main contents)

[Previous Chapter](#) ← → [Next Chapter](#)

The second half of the seventeenth century saw the establishment of a plantation economy in Guyana based on African slave labour. The bulk of the African slaves were brought from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. They belonged to several tribes and several language groups.

The general view held by the Dutch planters, and the English planters after them, was that the African slaves did not hold to a system of beliefs that could be described as a religion. At best - so the members of the plantocracy and the church that served them felt - their beliefs amounted to nothing more than heathenish superstition.

Not a few of them, perhaps, felt that the Africans were incapable of religious sentiment. But the Africans held religious beliefs derived from their homeland. It may be useful to note that some of the slaves, particularly these who came from the Fula-speaking area of Senegambia, were Muslims.

Toby, a young Hausa-speaking Muslim slave in Hanover, Berbice, debated religious questions with the Rev. John Wray, the Congregational missionary in Berbice in the early nineteenth century.

Interestingly, Wray's successor in Berbice, Rev. Howe, was very impressed with Toby's intelligence and his desire to acquire knowledge, that after converting him to Christianity, he arranged for the young man to go to England for further training by the London Missionary Society. He was granted his freedom and his name was changed to Thomas Lewis. In 1836, he returned to Berbice as a catechist-teacher.

Toby's ancestors were most likely converted to Islam when that religion penetrated West Africa from the north by way of the Sahara Desert. But Islam among Africans did not long survive the Middle Passage and the plantation system. The practice of the planters of separating tribesmen from one another, and of discouraging the assembling of slaves for any purpose whatsoever, was not calculated to allow Islam to survive.

Again, the small number of African Muslims that came to Guyana lacked the leadership of Imams and the possession of the Qu'ran. Then, too, the plantation life did not lend itself for long prayers at fixed times, worship on a set day, fasting at prescribed periods, or feasting on holidays which did not coincide with those observed by the plantocracy. As such, the plantation which was geared exclusively to sugar production gave no scope for

the development of Islam as the Senegambian village did.

But if the Islam that came with African slaves did not survive the conditions of slavery, the name "Fulah" came to be used as a descriptive of indentured Indian Muslims and their descendants. The Blacks who labelled them Fulahs clearly knew Fula-speaking Africans who were Muslims.

On the other hand, indigenous African religious beliefs, which became labelled as "obeah", survived the difficulties of estate life in Guyana. But these beliefs underwent significant changes although they remained clearly "African" in structure. Three factors were mainly responsible for these changes.

In the first place, African religious ideas were capable of modification in response to the new circumstance of estate life. Secondly, the practice of African religion was frowned upon by estate authorities. This meant that the religion could only be practised secretly and irregularly. The result has been that some aspects of African religious practices withered away while others lost their nationality and language and became garbled. Thirdly, the exposure to Christianity led not only to the conversion of Blacks to that religion, but also to the overlapping of African and Christian beliefs.

While in Jamaica, after 1760, it became an offence punishable by death for slaves to practise obeah, it is not clear if the same situation existed in Guyana. Nevertheless, the slaves did not lack "religious" leaders who, however, were not as well trained or as carefully chosen as the priests who served the African villages and compounds.

The policy of the plantocracy of separating African tribesmen from one another (as far as this was practicable) also affected the development of African religion in Guyana, since that religion traditionally had a strong link with the tribe.

(Note: The author is indebted to the writings of Dr. Dale Bisnauth on this topic).