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COVER: The Cherubs on the round bas-
relief decorations on the ceiling of the magni-
ficent ballroom of Devon House are one of
the delightful surprises of the century-old
mansion. Hauffe/Collins

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Plants, Spirits and the Meaning

The word 'John' appears 33 times in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* as a generic term in the compound common names of people, birds, plants and other objects. This paper will show that objects named 'John' are often associated in Jamaica with the world of spirits. I will focus on the vine *Abrus precatorius*, which Jamaicans call John Crow Bead, and its links — by virtue of John as a generic term — to the Christmas dancing in Jamaica called John Canoe (also spelled Jonkonnu) and to the vulture called John Crow (*Cathartes aura*). This paper suggests that the dance, the bird and the plant all have the name John because of their relationship to the world of spirits and spirit possession. It shows that John Canoe, who is the chief dancer of a troupe of dancers, is a spirit person or obeah-man (variously described as a witch doctor, magician, jumbie-man or sorcerer) and both the John Crow and the John Crow Bead are associated with death and with materials used in the practice of obeah.

John Crow Bead

The John Crow Bead (*Abrus precatorius*) is a relatively small, woody, twining vine common throughout Jamaica in thickets, hedgerows, and along roadsides. It is often found climbing on fences, shrubs and the trunks and branches of small trees. Generally regarded as a vine of the Old World tropics, and usually thought native to India, John Crow Bead is now widespread throughout the tropical and subtropical regions of the world.

The most striking feature of this vine is its showy clusters of pea-shaped fruits that open when ripe to expose hard, smooth, glossy red and black seeds with the black covering about a third of each seed. Because of their beauty, these brightly coloured seeds have been used in Jamaica and throughout the tropics and subtropics to make amulets and charms as well as necklaces, bracelets, earrings and other personal ornaments. Many of the most widely known common names for *Abrus precatorius* are related to its attractive oval-shaped seeds.

The English common names for *Abrus precatorius* are Crab Eye, Liquorice (Licorice Vine, Indian Liquorice, Wild Liquorice or False Liquorice),

Rosary Pea Vine or simply Rosary Pea, Jequirity (Jequirity Bean or Jequirity Pea), Precatory Bean and Prayer Bead. It is also called Lucky Bean (especially in relation to Africa), Love Pea, Weather Plant or Weather Vine and Coral-Bead Plant. In the 18th century, Browne [1756] and Long [1774] in their discussion of Jamaica's plant life identified *Abrus precatorius* as Wild Licorice and Red Bead Vine; they made no mention of the name John Crow Bead or any other common name. The plant is still called 'Likrish' in Jamaica and it is occasionally identified as Jumbie Bead; today it is primarily known as Crab Eye and John Crow Bead (or John Crow Bead Vine or John Crow Eye).

Spirits and Plants

In the Caribbean the common names for *Abrus precatorius* point to its association with the spirit world and suggest that John as one of the generic terms in its compound common names is an expression of this association. The link is made by the fact that in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, the plant is known as Jumbie Bead, and in some places, as for example, the Virgin Islands, it is also called Devil Bead [Williams and Williams 1941; Millspaugh 1902, 1974; Adams 1971b; Allan and Allen 1981]. Jumbie (jumbi, jumby, jumbee, jumbay, jamby) or zombi are just different terms for spirits. These terms are more widely used in the eastern Caribbean than in Jamaica [Cassidy 1971, Beckwith 1929].

In Jamaica spirits are most frequently identified as 'duppies'. They are largely of human origin, being spirits of the dead. Usually considered more harmful than good, they interact with the living and in doing so directly affect the routine of daily life. They love the night, especially when perfumed by the aromatic Basil (*Ocimum basilicum* L.) and the strong sweet smell of the Night-blooming Jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*). They 'feed upon bamboo root, "fig" leaves and the gourd-like fruit of a vine called "duppy pumpkin"' [Beckwith 1929 p.89] and live at the root of cotton trees (*Ceiba pentandra*), in burial grounds and old abandoned buildings, and in dark places such as caves, mangrove swamps, bamboo thickets and forests. Duppies can be visible or



Lily Perkins



Duppy Cherry (*Cordia alliodora*).

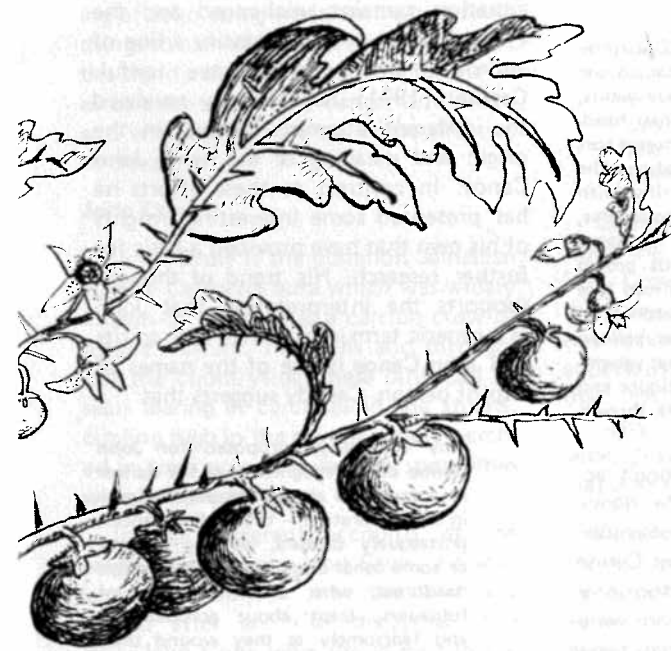
of 'John' in Jamaica

By John Rashford

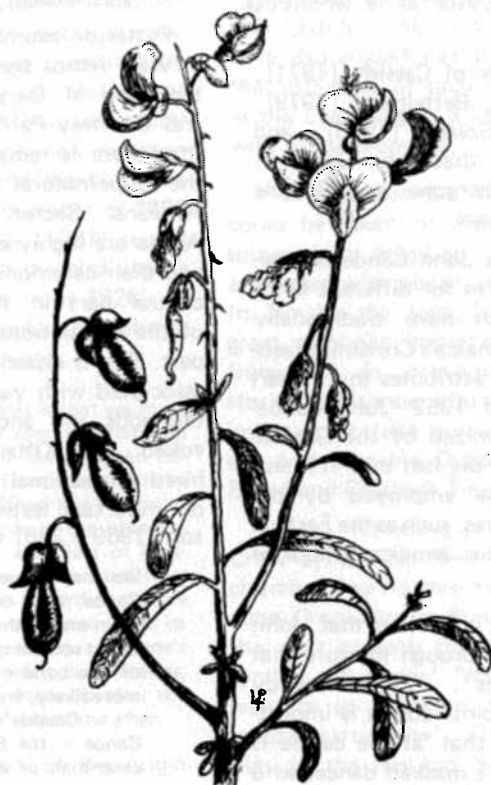
invisible. When visible, they are said to appear in human and non-human forms. While these spirits are seen as acting on their own accord, they can also be controlled by spirit people — 'science' men and women who establish contact with supernatural beings or forces in order to understand and influence the course of natural events. There are over 35 names for spirit people in Jamaica and obeah-man or -woman is by far the most important [Cassidy and LePage 1967].¹ Another important name is jumbie-man, a spirit person Cassidy and LePage describe as 'having magical powers'.

It was jumbie as a generic term that first suggested the link between *Abrus precatorius* and the spirit world. The term seems to fulfil the same role in the eastern Caribbean as John and duppy do in Jamaica and jorka in Suriname.² There are over 20 plants in Jamaica with duppy as the generic term in their compound names [Perkins 1969], and it appears that the same is true of jumbie in the eastern Caribbean. In his *Sketches of African and Indian Life in British Guiana*, for example, the Rev. J. Scoles [1885 pp. 51 - 60] wrote that jumbie 'be it known is a great power out here, and we may almost add, a sort of public pet, for so many things have been given or dedicated to him, and on so many things such as trees, flowers, seeds, berries and birds his name like a trade mark or sign appears'. Things with the trade mark jumbie are associated with danger and death. Scoles [p. 62] reports that the seeds of the 'sand-box Jumbie tree' (which he also identified as Sand-box Tree and Monkey Dinner Bell Tree) 'are a dangerous cathartic and have at times destroyed young children, who indulged in the too free eating thereof; moreover we are told these seeds are used by the wicked Obeah-man in making up his deadly compounds to destroy the victims of his wickedness'.

The initial reason for considering jumbie as a generic term and its links to the world of spirits was its association with the plant Jamaicans call Jumbie Chocho. Although she did not know the scientific name of this plant, Perkins [1969] noted that it 'seems to belong to the Duppy Class'. Jumbie Chocho which is now extensively naturalized in the coastal areas of the wetter parts of the island (particularly



Duppy Tomato (*Solanum ciliatum*).



Duppy Rattle (*Croton retusus*).

in Portland and St. Mary) is the small tree *Morinda citrifolia* introduced to Jamaica from the tropics of Asia and the Pacific.

Cassidy [1971] indicates that in Jamaica *Morinda citrifolia* is known as Indian Mulberry, Blunda, Duck Apple, Hog Berry, Pig's Apple or Monkey Berry. In eastern Portland (where I conducted field work), *Morinda citrifolia* is commonly called Hog Apple although it is also identified as Jumbie Chocho and (less frequently as) Duppy Chocho. Cassidy [1971] does not identify *Morinda citrifolia* as Duppy Chocho but he does point out that the name Jumbie Chocho implies 'that though it looks like chocho it is not good to eat (as in the many *duppy* names . . .)'. Moreover, in explaining Monkey Berry which is one of the Jamaican common names for *Morinda citrifolia*, Cassidy [1971 p. 382] writes 'Monkey does not refer to actual animals eating the fruit (as hog, pig, and duck do), but suggests also that this is something like the proper plant but not really good — it imitates it in a ridiculous way as a monkey does a man . . .'. Monkey appears as a generic term in relation to several plants of which Monkey Breadfruit or Prickly Breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*) and Monkey Fiddle or Duppy Fee-Fee *Pedilanthus tithymaloides*) are two examples.³

On a broad level, the words duppy, jumbie, monkey and devil, when used as generic terms in compound names, suggest that things so named manifest unusual, strange or tricky characteristics. Some have false appearances resembling or imitating things that are useful to humans. Some thrive in dark places or are active at nights; some make strange sounds or produce strong smells and some for various reasons are associated with harm, danger, sorrow, graveyards, and death.⁴

John Canoe

Although it was the term jumbie that first drew my attention to *Abrus precatorius* and its links to the world of spirits, it is the name John Crow Bead that has proven most interesting. It points to the significance of John as a generic term in compound common names and suggests a relationship between John Canoe, John Crow and John Crow Bead.

John Canoe is African Jamaican street dancing that traditionally occurs during the Christmas holiday [See Ryman's article in this issue]. It is clear from the earliest accounts that John Canoe was

the name of the principal dancer as well as the troupe of dancers; John Canoe as the principal dancer was described as wild, grotesque, and menacing. For example, Long [1774 pp. 424-425], the English planter, politician and historian who was in Jamaica during the 1750s and 1760s wrote:

In the towns, during the Christmas holidays, they have several tall robust fellows dressed up in grotesque habits, and a pair of ox-horns on their head, sprouting from the top of a horrid sort of vizor, or mask, which about the mouth is rendered very terrific with large boar-tusks. The masquerader, carrying a wooden sword in his hand, is followed with a numerous crowd of drunken women, who refresh him frequently with a sup of aniseed-water, whilst he dances at every door, bellowing out John Connul with great vehemence; so that, what with the liquor and the exercise, most of them are thrown into dangerous fevers.

Twenty-three years after Long's account there is evidence that the dance was already changing. An anonymous writer in his description of John Canoe dancers in 1797 reports that 'formerly their conceptions and execution were comparatively rude to what has been exhibited for the few last years: their aim was then a savage but is now often a polite appearance'. Like Long, this anonymous writer also recognized that the principal dancer was 'always called a John Canoe'. Unlike Long, however, he described John Canoe as 'a whimsical character'.

From the work of Cassidy [1971], Patterson [1969], Bettelheim [1979], Abrahams and Szwed [1983], and others it is clear that John Canoe in Jamaica has undergone considerable change over the years.

In recent years John Canoe has become a general term for different kinds of troupes which have traditionally participated in Jamaica's Christmas festivities. Bettelheim attributes this in part to the 1951 and 1952 'John Canoe' competitions organized by the *Gleaner* newspaper and to the fact that 'it is also the generic name employed by the government agencies, such as the Festival Commission or the Jamaica School of Dance'.

Even though it is obvious that 'John Canoe is now a thorough mixture that takes many forms . . .' as Cassidy [1971 p. 262] points out, it is important to remember that 'at the centre is still the figure of a masked dancer who makes the procession, prancing wildly and shouting, in a traditional African dance'.

Although Sloane [1725] presented one of the earliest descriptions of street dancing at Christmas, it was Long who first recorded the name 'John Connu' in 1774. Cassidy [1971] indicates that 'the meaning of the name is uncertain' and Patterson [1969] agrees. This situation remains unchanged and the effort here is only to identify a line of approach that might prove useful. Cassidy [1971] has critically reviewed the different attempts to explain the origin and meaning of the name John Canoe. In contrast to these efforts he has presented some interesting insights of his own that have provided a basis for further research. His trend of thought supports the interpretation that John as a generic term is associated with spirits and John Canoe is one of the names of a spirit person. Cassidy suggests that:

Any etymology proposed for **John Canoe** must recognize that the dancer so named was always the central figure in the celebration — the **leading** dancer, grotesquely dressed, wearing a mask or some other disguising but distinctive headdress, who, with his train of followers, leapt about acrobatically and fearsomely as they wound their way through the village collecting contributions. The most likely source is the Ewe language, in which **dzono** means a magician or sorcerer, and **kunu** means something terrible or deadly, a cause of death; **dzonko** is also a name which a sorcerer calls himself, and -nu means a man — thus, 'sorcerer-man', or 'witch-doctor'.

Patterson examined parallel practices in West Africa based on his belief (and that also of Daryll Forde, Herskovits and Geoffrey Parrinder whom he cites) that there is remarkable uniformity in the supernatural belief of all West Africans. Secret societies of West Africa are highly developed institutions and their ceremonial activities include a central part in the seasonal festivals of the populations of which they are a part. This is especially true of 'the rites associated with yam harvest . . . when the gods and ancestral spirits are invoked Often the secret societies hired professional bands of entertainers on important festival occasions'. Patterson [1969 p.246] concludes:

We may suggest, then that the John-Canoe was originally derived either from one of the dances of West African secret societies, or from the main dance of the band of hired entertainers, or, more likely, from both of these sources Cassidy's etymology for John-Canoe — the Ewe word meaning Sorcerer-man or witch-doctor — strengthens our case when it is noted that witch-doctors were often the head of secret societies and themselves performed the main ritual dances involved.

Both Cassidy and Patterson suggest that John Canoe is the name of a spirit person or obeah-man. The association of the name John with obeah becomes important when we consider the red-headed black-feathered bird Jamaicans call John Crow. In explaining the meaning of John as a generic term which links things so named with the world of spirits, the significant fact about this bird is its association with evil, danger and death and with materials used in the practice of obeah.

John Crow

John Crow is the common Jamaican vulture *Cathartes aura* which was widely known in the past as a carrion crow or turkey vulture. In towns and throughout the countryside, these birds can be seen tearing at carcasses in the streets, circling high in the sky, or simply perched in trees or on house-tops, sometimes with outspread wings.

In the different accounts of the origin of the name John Crow, a popular explanation is that the bird was named after an Irish clergyman, the Rev. John Crow who was in Port Royal in the 1680s. The story has it that he gave an unpopular sermon exhorting transported prisoners to submit to the authorities and 'in contempt, they named the bird *John Crow*, its black plumage and bald red head reminding them of the time-serving preacher' [Cassidy 1971 p. 307]. Cassidy rejects this explanation. The story was presented by Gardner in his book *A History of Jamaica* published in 1873 and as Cassidy points out, he made no link between the Rev. John Crow and the bird. The sermon was given in November of 1689 and Cassidy and LePage [1967] report that 'the first record of the bird's being called "John Crow" is from 1826'. In his evaluation of the explanation above, Cassidy [1971 p 307] writes:

The greatest objection is that we must assume a period of over one hundred and thirty years to have elapsed between the giving of the name and the first record of it. Since this is one of the best known birds in the island — one that has been a subject of legislation and one that most writers have taken notice of — it is hard to believe that **John Crow** can have been its name for so long without anyone's mentioning it. As with such stories, this was very likely made up after the fact — indeed, quite some time after.

Cassidy's explanation of the origin of the name John Crow raises more questions than it answers. He writes that 'it is probably significant that the

American term "Jim Crow" came into being at almost the same time as *john-crow*'. He notes the similarities between the Jim Crow dance and the dancing in Jamaica (although he makes no mention of John Canoe dancing in this context) and he concludes:

My suspicion is that the popularity of the American 'Jim Crow' helped the parallel creation, Jamaican **johncrow**, to rise into prominence. Applied to the 'carrion crow' as a nickname, it must have established itself rapidly until it superseded all its competitors.

Cassidy's 'suspicion' is not convincing. How the popularity of the American 'Jim Crow' helped in the 'creation' of the name John Crow in Jamaica, why it was applied to the bird and why it has superseded all other names are questions that remain to be answered. Cassidy is right in associating Jim Crow and John Crow, but he offers no compelling reason for this association.⁵

Cassidy and LePage [1967] have offered two additional explanations for the origin of the name John Crow and while these explanations seem plausible they leave many questions still unanswered. They suggest that the word is folk-etymology derived from its former name carrion crow which has been 'reduced in popular pronunciation to CYANCRO /kyangkro/ whence by affrication of /ky-/ to /ty-/ and voicing to /j/ — both common phenomena in the folk speech — the form /jangkro/'. They have also argued that the name could be the 'influence of such an African word as the Ewe *dongro*, a large kind of fowl with sparse plumage . . .'

I suggest that the name John Crow could be taken to mean obeah-man's, sorcerer's or magician's crow or a crow associated with obeah, sorcery or magic. In Jamaica the John Crow is a bird of great symbolic importance. It appears frequently in proverbs, sayings and stories and is most often associated with imitative or false appearance, ugliness, evil and (like the Duppy Bird, Dragon Blood and Calabash Tree) with death.

In the following proverb the John Crow symbolizes the opposite of the church: 'You no care more 'bout it dan John Crow care fe Sunday marnin'. In the next proverb the John Crow is a symbol of shame 'When John Crow wan' fe go a lowlan' him say a cool breeze carry him'. (The John Crow flies to the lowland because it smells carrion but is ashamed to admit that this is the reason why it is going). The bird is also used to express the idea of

bad company as in the following proverb which states that 'If you fly wid John Crow you wi' nyam dead meat'. Finally, the John Crow is a symbol of a vain, imitative, pretentious person as revealed in this last proverb: 'John Crow say him a dandy-man, but same time him hab so-so fedder'.

The John Crow is an omen of death in Jamaica. Tradition has it that if the bird perches on a roof top someone inside will die. Pullen-Burry [1905: pp. 150-153] mentions a writer who saw a John Crow fly across a market:

Instantly a large number of ragged boys were pushed forward by their elders, who cried out: 'Pickney oo' no see bad luck bird,' a shrill chorus, "Kirry out! Kirry out!" was repeated with 'Pepper an' salt fe your manny.' This treatment satisfying all parties, they quickly retired. No one dares to throw a stone at this bird, as it is believed fever would result from such an action.

Madden [1835 p. 72] wrote that while living in St. Andrew, he found a small obeah bundle with 'brown leaves, broken into small bits, shreds of red wood rolled up, mixed with hair and some dirt'. He tells us that he

took it home and had it placed over the door of an old Mulatto woman, — a very troublesome old lady, who carried water for us, and who had a mortal aversion for Johnny Crows whenever she was indisposed. Her antipathy to this black angel of death, Captain Mason and myself were often in the habit of rallying her about . . .

This idea that John Crow knows when death is imminent also finds expression in proverbial form. It is said 'when John Crow see mauger horse him roas' plantain fe him' [Anderson and Cundall 1972]. Along similar lines, Beckwith [1929] in her discussion of omens of death in Jamaica reports that 'Crows flying at twilight or in "funeral procession" are ominous'.

What has been said above is true not only of Jamaica but other areas of the Caribbean as well. Although the John Crow has been the focus of attention here it is clear that similar ideas are also associated with other birds. Writing of the Jumbie bird in Guyana, for example, Scoles [1885 pp. 69- 65] notes that:

The visits of this black bird are alarming and of course unwelcome, for when he flutters around inhabitable dwellings, it is [a] sad omen that one among the living will quickly be numbered among the dead. Ravens elsewhere, and some say owls, are supposed to be birds of the same bad, or evil omen.

In looking at the relationship between obeah and the John Crow, the significant point to consider, as Beckwith [1929 pp. 109 - 110] has recognized, is that 'Objects associated with animals of ill omen also furnish good magic for the Obeah Man. Feathers and beaks of birds, horns, hooves, and hair of animals and their bones or shells of insects are among the objects found in Obeah Man's bundle, as well as dried herbs and seeds and dried parts of animals'. This is pertinent to the meaning of John and what this name tells us about the dance, the bird, and the seed. From this perspective we can make better sense of what Lewis [1834: pp. 73 - 76] saw when he reported that at a 'festival' given upon his return to his estate in Jamaica, 'Mr. John-Canoe' wore a headdress 'surmounted with a plume of John Crow feathers which crowned the top'

John Crow Bead, Obeah and African Jamaican Resistance

Coming back to the John Crow Bead (*Abrus precatorius*), we see that like the John Canoe and the John Crow, it too (as suggested by the name John) is associated with obeah and with spirits, danger and death. This association is especially important when we consider the relationship between obeah, the use of poisons and African Jamaican resistance to forced labour.

It is often said that *Abrus precatorius* is called John Crow Bead because of the similarity between its red and black seed and the vulture with its red head and black feathers. While I was conducting field work in Jamaica, several informants offered this explanation. Although this might well be true, it still leaves us to ponder the meaning of John in Jamaica and to ask why this name is associated with so many things including the plant and the bird.

It could very well be that the seed is, like the bird, an obeah-man's, sorcerer's, or magician's bead or a bead associated with obeah, sorcery or magic. In this context it is possible that the name Jumbie Bead which occurs throughout the Caribbean could be interpreted to mean the bead of a jumbie-man. Here we should recall Beckwith's [1929] observation that there were many objects in an obeah-man's 'bundle' or 'things' among which were usually 'dried herbs and seeds'. The significance of seeds used as beads in the African tradition has long been recognized. McClure [1982 p. 295] writes:

John Rashford



John Crow Bead (*Abrus precatorius*).

The West Africans agree in the 'one universe' custom' (Hughes, 1750) of ornamenting their bodies with strings of beads (Park, 1815). Sometimes beads were the only protection worn by Africans . . . during their transport (Poole, 1850). Often beads reflect religious undertones, as indicated by the necessity of beads in the ceremonial garb of West African tribes, the Arawaks and the Caribs. Many African markets devoted whole streets to the exclusive sale of beads (Barth 1858 - 1859; Poole 1850).

One of the cases from the criminal record book of St. Andrew which Madden [1835 p. 95] presents is the trial in 1773 of a woman named Sarah 'for having in her possession cats' teeth, cats' claws, cats' jaws, hair, *beads* (my emphasis), knotted cords, and other materials, relative to the practice of obeah'. The British geologist De la Beche [1829 pp. 25 - 27] also reports his participation in searching an obeah-man who had with him 'an old snuff-box, several phials, some filled with liquids and some with powders, one with pounded glass; some dried herbs, teeth, *beads* (my emphasis), hair, and other trash'. While we do not know which beads are being identified here, it is clear that John Crow Bead could have been among them. An anonymous writer at the end of the 18th century [Higman 1976 p.

11] reports that 'besides the usual European ornaments of earrings and necklaces, the women have at different times used as beads, the seeds of *Jobs' tears*, *liquorice* (John Crow Bead) and *lilac*'.

Other factors also link the John Crow Bead with obeah. One important consideration is the fact that the plant is useful to continental Africans and to Africans in the New World, and there are similarities and differences in the use of the plant. As McClure [1982 p. 294] indicates, 'some of the uses are of certain West African origin while others are unique to the Caribbean'. *Abrus precatorius* is a source of medicine and poison in both places, and this is an especially significant fact as the use of plants is an important technique of spirit people as is evident in the name bushman or bush doctor. Beckwith [1929 p. 137] reports that 'the knowledge of poisonous herbs is well-known to those who are versed in "bush medicine", an art in which the Obeah Man is bound to perfect himself. Ordinary poisons and their remedy are known to all but the most ignorant.' One of the most important similarities is the fact that the John Crow Bead (like the John Crow and John Canoe) is clearly linked to obeah in Jamaica and McClure [1982 p. 295] tells us it is also 'linked to witch-

craft and the obeah religion of West Africa'. Junod [1927 p. 314] described the use of *Abrus* seeds in the 'magical' practice of Southern Africans. These seeds which are called 'Lucky Beans' were used in the construction of an 'enchanted flute'. Watt [1962 p. 535] reports that 'the Luvale sorcerer when plotting to kill a person, makes an effigy of the intended victim and inserts an *Abrus* seed in place of each ear'. Weiss [1979 p. 47] says that among East African fishermen, *Abrus* was used in 'witchcraft' and the only definite use of it was in 'divination' where the seeds were thrown and the pattern read. McClure mentions the use of the seeds in divination and suggests that this could be related to the fact that the seed resembles an eye. This is true. In many places *Abrus* seeds are associated with crabs' eyes, birds' eyes and so on. It could be that the seed is called John Crow Eye not only because it resembles the eye of the John Crow bird (or any other bird for that matter), but because it is the 'eye' by means of which the 'sorcerer' or 'magician' divines the nature of things.

There is as yet no thorough study of the cultural significance of *Abrus precatorius* in Jamaica, the rest of the Caribbean, or in Africa. The only other important similarity to be considered here is the use of this plant as a poison and the way in which this is related to the practice of obeah.

The association between obeah and poisoning was one frequently mentioned by the 18th and 19th century writers [Edwards 1756; Long 1774; Lewis 1834; Stewart 1823; Williams 1826; Lynch 1856]. Marsden [1788] went so far as to say that obeah was the general African name for poisons and Beckwith [1929 p. 138] reports that 'skeptical' African Jamaicans said the same thing during the time she did research in Jamaica. Similarly, in his evidence to the Royal Commission of Enquiry formed after the 1865 rebellion, Beckford Davis [cited in Rampini 1873] said that 'of all the motive powers which influence the (African Jamaica) . . . character, by far the most dangerous, is that of Obeah'. He went on to define obeah as a 'two-fold art . . . the art of poisoning, combined with the art of imposing upon the credulity of ignorant people by a pretense of witchcraft'. Rampini [1873 p. 212] tells us that in addition to grave dirt, hair, egg shell, cats' claws, etc., 'every bush and every tree furnishes weapons': and this point is of great interest especially when we consider one

of the explanations offered by Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* [1971]. It states that the word obeah is of African origin and indicated that it is 'akin to Edo *obi* poison, Twi *abia*, a creeper used in making medicine and charms'. The association between obeah and poisoning is still widely recognized today. The *Funk and Wagnalls New Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* [1977] defines obeah as:

A kind of sorcery practiced by the (Africans) . . . of the West Indies and SE United States: a revival or survival of African magic rites, specializing in poisons and the power of terror.

The history of Africans in Jamaica is a history of resistance to forced labour. This resistance has taken many forms — insincerity of effort (such as procrastination, evasion, and feigned sickness), satire, sabotage, refusal to work, escape, suicide and individual and collective violence including riots, rebellions and attempted revolutions [Patterson 1969; Madden 1835; Beckford 1971, 1972; Marshall 1972; Nettleford 1972; Robinson 1974]. In discussing acts of individual violence, Patterson [1969 p. 265] reports that 'the means usually employed for exacting vengeance . . . was poisoning. At this (Africans) . . . were extremely expert, especially the African Obeah-man from whom most of the poison originally came'. This is an interesting point especially when we consider that

. . . Obeah functioned largely in the numerous rebellions of the (Africans) . . . This was particularly the case with the obeah-men from the Gold Coast, one of whom took a leading part in the serious uprising of 1760. In the plotting of these rebellions the obeah-man was essential in the administering of oaths of secrecy, and in cases, distributing fetishes which were supposed to immunize the insurgents from the arms of the whites [Patterson 1969 p. 192].

Given the relationship between obeah and African resistance, it is interesting that Obeahman Bluebird or Obeahman Cunny is the Jamaican name for the bird *Euneornius campestris* and Cassidy and LePage [1965] indicate that 'the name alludes to its cleverness in avoiding traps and not being caught'.

There were many reasons for an obeah-man or -woman to avoid being caught since hanging, torture, burning, transportation were the principal punishments for obeah crimes [e.g. Madden 1835; Edwards 1793; Lewis 1834]. What were obeah crimes? There were many but chief among them was 'the

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administering of any poison or deleterious ingredient' [Madden 1835 p. 74].

Although Madden, a British colonial administrator, had difficulty collecting information — for he tells us several times that the Africans 'have a great disinclination to speak on the subject of obeah, or of poisons' — he was well aware of the existence of many poisonous plants in Jamaica, a list he thought too long: 'to enumerate even the names would occupy many pages'. Of these poisonous plants Madden [1835 p. 61] wrote 'the qualities of some of them (were) better known to the (Africans) . . . than the whites'.

It is within the context outlined above that we must consider that *Abrus precatorius* is a 'deadly vine' [Hardin and Arena 1975 p. 81] whose seeds, as Adams [1976 p. 56] points out, have long been known to contain 'one of the most virulent of all plant poisons'. Kingsbury [1965 p. 25] says 'the tiny bean itself is among the most highly toxic of natural materials, organic or inorganic' and the United States Department of Health and Human Services report [1982 p. 21] that *Abrus precatorius* 'is responsible for more plant fatalities in Florida than any other species'.

Tampion [1977 p. 23] expresses the present opinion of many when he says 'growing plants, seeds and any objects containing the seeds should be considered highly dangerous . . .' Objects once made from the 'deadly seeds' [Everett 1982 p. 9] of *Abrus precatorius* are now banned from many parts of Europe and North America. Kingsbury [1965 p. 27] notes 'large number of necklaces, bracelets, and other ornaments are produced in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and elsewhere and are imported into the United States despite governmental efforts to keep them out, or brought back as souvenirs by tourists and distributed widely'. In Jamaica, it is now illegal to make and sell necklaces and other personal items made from the seeds of *Abrus precatorius* although they are still used in making maracas and the eyes of birds carved out of wood.

The poison of *Abrus precatorius* is a phytotoxin, i.e. a toxin produced by a plant. Chemically, however, the toxin is related to snake venoms and to the toxins produced by bacteria. Some of the lethal symptoms include drowsiness, cold sweat, nausea, vomiting, weakness, severe diarrhoea, weak and accelerated pulse and incoordination. It has often been reported in the literature that poison derived from the seeds of

Abrus precatorius have been used to kill people and livestock in India [Allan and Allen 1981; Blohm 1962 p. 29; Muenschner 1939 p. 124]. Grieve [1971 p. 492] says *Abrus precatorius* has a 'notorious history in India as an agent in criminal poisoning'.

It is easy to agree with Kingsbury [1965 p. 25] when he reports that *Abrus precatorius* is 'a common vine of tropical countries, where its toxic properties have long been known and put to use in legal and illegal ways' [Schery 1952 p. 283; Blohm 1962 p. 29]. Citing nine references, Ayensu [1978 p. 144] indicates that there are 'many places' in West Africa where *Abrus precatorius* is a source of poison. Although members of the Apocynaceae appear to be the main source of African arrow poisons, Watt and Breyer [1962 pp. 67 - 68] identify *Abrus precatorius* as one of 22 species from which poisons are derived. In addition to Senegal, West Africa in general as well as India, McClure [1982 p. 295] cites authors who indicate that the plant has been used as a source of poison in the Bahamas and South Florida. She writes: 'The rosary pea contains a toxin, abrin, that has the potential for use in Obeah curses . . . and Obeah cultures in the Old and New World tropics, and seems to be a significant reason for (Africans) . . . to transport *Abrus* with them on their (forced) voyage because it had potential for protection against evil spirits to be encountered in the new lands'. Of the many people who have provided me with information on this plant, only one person (from St. Mary) mentioned its use as a source of poison. He said a lethal preparation made from *Abrus precatorius* is without odour or taste and that the poison was prepared by mixing it with white rum.

Conclusion

It is puzzling that the word John appears over 33 times in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* as a generic term in compound common names, the majority of which make reference in direct or oblique fashion to the spirit world, and this paper has suggested that often, objects so named are associated with the world of spirits and spirit possession. The term obeah has been used in Jamaica from as early as the 18th century as a general name for various beliefs in a spirit world and those who seek to manipulate this world. This paper has sought to show that John Canoe, who is the chief dancer of a troupe of dancers, is a spirit person or obeah-man and that both the John Crow Bird and the John

Crow Bead are associated with danger and death and with materials used in the practice of obeah. Abrahams and Szwed [1983 p. 138] in their presentation of extracts on African life in the Caribbean taken from British travel accounts and journals of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, report that African Jamaican religious practice was always an important topic of discussion in these early works and that 'the amount of detail on the paraphernalia of practices was staggering, but surprisingly, few of the observers tried to discover the system of correspondences lying behind the objects and their uses'. This article has been concerned with this system of correspondence, particularly as it is expressed in the relationship between spirits and plants and in the name John.

In the relationship between African Jamaicans and the natural world, 'Plant life', writes Beckwith [1929 p. 117], 'is alive with spirit power'. John Crow Bead is one of over 31 plants associated with spirits in Jamaica and these plants enter into all areas of social life from fishing to burial customs. This link between spirits and plants is important. It contributes to our understanding of the continuity of African tradition in the New World. It furthers our understanding of the ethnobotany of Jamaica, particularly the island's herbal tradition, and it is essential to understanding African Jamaican religion and its role in the island's social history of resistance to racial oppression and exploitative labour. In considering the relationship between spirits and plants, we must always remember that 'the lines drawn among magic, superstition, religion, funeral practices, and obeah belong more to European cosmology than they do to Afro-West Indian' [Abrahams and Szwed 1983 p.139]. This is an important point especially when we consider, as Ayensu [1981 p.87] makes clear, that 'in African culture traditional medical practitioners are always considered to be influential spiritual leaders as well, using magic and religion along with medicines. Illness is handled with Man's hidden spiritual powers and with the application of plants that have been found especially to contain healing powers'.

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Notes

1. While some words expressing the beliefs of Jamaicans are no longer used and some persist but have lost their importance, others, Cassidy [1971 p. 395] writes, 'are in rigorous use, especially **duppy** and **obeah**, which have entered into a great many combinations and invaded every part of life'.
2. The term 'Yorka' and the way in which (like Duppy and Jumbie) it is applied to birds, particular locations and plants (as with 'Jorka Okro' and 'Jorka Pese' or 'Jorka' Peas) was pointed out to me by my colleague Dr. Gary Brana-Shute. In conversation, Dr. Robert Power of Suriname has also provided information on the use of *Abrus precatorius* there.
3. An examination of the relationship between spirits and plants suggests that religious ideas help to regulate the relationship between Jamaicans and their environment. It could be argued that a practical significance of the terms duppy, monkey, devil, zombie or jumbie is that they help in the necessary process of distinguishing edible plants from those which only appear edible and might in fact be quite poisonous. This is particularly important for children to learn in a country like Jamaica where all manner of fruiting herbs, shrubs, vines and trees exist. What is good for duppy or jumbie is dangerous, even deadly, for humans. There is the 'real' Chocho — the fruit of the vine *Secium edule* — and Duppy or Jumbie Chocho which Cassidy [1967] says looks like a 'stunted' chocho. There is 'real' Coconut and Duppy Coconut, 'real' Tomato and Duppy Tomato, 'real' Soursop and Duppy Soursop, 'real' Cherry and Duppy Cherry, 'real' Calaloo and Duppy Calaloo and so on.

In the same way that duppy names help in a practical way to distinguish edible from inedible plants, plants which are kept away from dwellings because they are associated with spirits might actually serve some useful purpose. Both *Cestrum nocturnum* and species of the genus *Jasminum* grow in Jamaica and are called Jasmine as well as Jessamy or Jessamine. The *Cestrum nocturnum* is more specifically known as Night-Blooming Jasmine or Jessamine and Lady or Queen-of-the-Night. This sprawling scented shrub which is a native of the Caribbean is kept away from dwellings because its strong smell is said to attract spirits. Keeping certain plants away from the dwelling is an established tradition in Jamaica. Long [1774 p. 803] notes, for example, that 'The (Africans) . . . are possessed with an opinion of the good or bad qualities of particular trees (and other plants), when planted near any habitation, as to the effects their neighbourhood may occasion to the inhabitants'. Like the owl, the Night-Blooming Jasmine is seen as unusual because it is 'active' at night, and it produces an 'overpowering' fragrance. Considering this tradition from a practical point of view, Webster in *Caribbean Gardening* [1965] warns

us that the Queen-of-the-Night 'has such powerfully sweet odour as to produce nausea, headache, so should not be grown near houses'.

4. In Jamaica, children traditionally played with the seeds of *Abrus precatorius* in a variety of ways, including their use in games. Today these seeds are still used in making shakers, the eyes of birds carved out of wood and other craft items. In the past *Abrus* seeds were used in making purses, belts, designs on straw baskets and other souvenirs before this practice was made illegal in Jamaica because of the poisonous nature of the seeds. *Abrus* seeds have also been used to make a bracelet Louise Bennett has described as 'baby fattening bead'. As the child grows, additional beads would be added to the bracelet. Informants from the district of Brandon Hill in rural St. Andrew say that in the past a few *Abrus* seeds were put in 'kerosene oil lamps' for decoration and 'to make the oil burn longer'. This has also been reported for Barbados. There are many other uses of this vine that are unique to either Africa or the New World.
5. An examination of the relationship between Jim Crow and John Crow is beyond the scope of this paper. I would suggest, however, that Jim is used in the same way as John. One factor that indicates that this is so is a plant that is called Jim Crow Nose in the United States and John Crow Nose-Hole in Jamaica. The parallel significance of Jim and John as generic terms explains in part the relationship between Jim Crow dancing and John Canoe dancing, both with their 'grotesque' aspects.

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