

OBEAH

ON THE RISE IN BAHAMAS

A Special Investigative Report

Ezekiel and Marie had been married for ten years. Here was a perfect couple from all outward appearances, but Zeke had secret affairs going with other women. He was a wealthy merchant with several successful businesses to his claim, but he was a heavy drinker. He could have had over \$2½ million in the bank plus other investments but booze and politics carried him for a good shake. One night, on one of his "fun" outings, he met Hazel McIntosh, a pretty, brown-haired West Indian girl. She was plump and thirtyish. He immediately fell for her. She pretended to him but her eyes were set on his money—more than on Zeke himself. Hazel always entertained dreams of having a rich man like Zeke and this was her golden chance. She was determined not to let him get away.

A secret love affair was alright for Zeke but Hazel had higher ambitions: she wanted a steady hold on richness. Suddenly Zeke's marriage exploded forcing him to leave home and seek the permanent refuge of his starry-eyed, brown-haired love. The trick was simple: Hazel had succeeded in "fixing" her man.

This is only one of many stories commonly told in the Bahamas today. For Obeah, Witchcraft, Voodoo are three cults that are steadily on the rise in various parts of the Western World. Taking the place of the old religious worship this "New Religion" is becoming "the thing" to turn to for desired results against someone loved or hated.

The word, "Obeah," strikes fear in the hearts of many grassroot Bahamians. History says this cult was introduced to the West Indies by slaves from West Africa when they were brought to these islands to

work the large plantations of their European masters. The slaves, living close to nature out on the plantations, knew the many herbs, leaves, roots and bush potions to either heal a sick friend or kill a hated enemy. They were expert herbalists, and their art was used as a secret weapon against cruel slave masters. During the slave era many slave masters were afflicted with incurable sores, and many died, as a result of the deadly potions sprinkled on "Massa's" clothing or stirred into his food.

Still today, in Haiti, the fear of "zombies" and of becoming one is very real. The "zombie" is believed to be a person who has been buried and raised from the dead by some mystical formula which makes him a total slave to a sorcerer. Because these "houngans" (witch doctors) are so skilled in the use of native herbs and drugs it is said that most "zombie" cases are the result of drug-induced catalepsy. In such a state a person is pronounced dead, buried, and then dug up. The truth is that a good dose of narcotics extracted from certain herbs can put an unfortunate victim in a state of mental apathy. One Haitian plant whose leaves cause such sleep is called the "tuer-lever" (literally, "kill and rise").

In the Bahamas, Obeah was brought into active use by the large Haitian and West Indian immigrant population and given financial encouragement by well-to-do Bahamians. There is no talk of "zombies" here, but the use of deadly herbs and potions, according to reliable sources, is increasing in Nassau and to some extent in Freeport.

Obeah thrives not only among the lower brackets

of the Bahamian society, during the past six years it has crept up among the "upper crusts" and infiltrated the ranks of supposedly "good Christians." Recently, there was a reported case of a Minister who was ostracized from his church for suspected dealings in Obeah.

Some landlords in Nassau are now using Obeah as a means of evicting tenants. A particular landlord keeps a permanent advertisement in the local paper . . . even after his apartment has been rented. It is rumored that this man, who requires of his tenants a deposit before moving in, keeps, "the hex" on his place. The apartment's rugs, drapes and sometimes mattress are "fixed" with a certain chemical concoction that forces the tenants out after only a week or so leaving behind his whole deposit. Sources say this is becoming quite a racket.

Last year, a young bartender and his wife entered their apartment and found, on three occasions, evidence of the "Unseen Hand." Rufus and Claudette had been living in an apartment in Pyfrom Addition for two weeks. On the Wednesday night of the third week, Rufus awakened from his sleep and met his front door wide open. The following day when he came home from work there was a suspicious sprinkling of black earth on the sofa and carpet.

He was not disturbed until a week later when both he and Claudette suddenly became restless in their sleep and decided to turn the mattress over. There it was: a reddish-brown stained handkerchief tied in a knot under the mattress. "Whatever was tied into the handkerchief did not have a pleasant odour," Rufus said, "the stench of it filled the whole apartment." The next day the couple, realizing that the "hound of hell" was on their trail, vacated the apartment and later moved to New York.

A local business executive reported that his apartment in High Vista was mysteriously entered and "fixed." Says P. Henderson, owner of a large manufacturing firm, "I went to bed early one evening but could not sleep as my skin started itching all over. Soon I took in with a severe headache, then my heart started beating real fast. I couldn't imagine what had gone wrong. I immediately rushed under the shower, then I changed my clothes and went out on the patio to inhale some fresh air. As soon as I began to inhale



Picture shows rug stained with chemical potion. Continued inhalation of fumes can result in mental disorder, and eventually, death.

the fresh air my headache started easing. I went back into the apartment and the damned headache started again! This was when I thoroughly searched by bedroom and discovered chemical stains all over the rug and mattress."

Henderson says doctors in the Bahamas refuse to believe in this phenomena although hundreds of people die each year as a result of it. The superstitious part of Obeahism—that of someone sticking needles in a doll is all rubbish, he said. "The dangerous thing is these chemical potions. It is so powerful it can slowly melt away the flesh on a person's body. You cannot sleep in a room where this stuff has been sprinkled, it absorbs all the oxygen in the room and an unsuspecting victim may die or lose his mind.

"Strangely," he said, "when the 'hexer' enters, nobody sees him because, in many cases, the victim's own maid, or butler is an agent of the dark dealers. It could be disastrous for the person who does not know how to beat the devious actions of the Obeah man or woman. These people have no heart or feeling for human lives—only money counts with them." ■