

**RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND PERSECUTION:
THE CASE OF THE SHAKERS IN ST. VINCENT
1900-1934**

by

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In a path breaking article published in 1970, sociologist Jeannette H. Henney discussed the practices, beliefs, and rituals of the Shakers in St. Vincent. For her, theirs is a stable religion with well established and recognized leaders in charge of the rites and governance of the movement. Henney's focus, which clearly is on the modern phase of the Shaker experience, draws heavily on field work conducted in the island in the 1960s and again in 1970. Accordingly, she beautifully interlaces throughout her discourse material gained from oral interviews in which present or past Shaker practitioners share with her their collective memories. While we are indebted to Henney, and her informants, for the contribution which they have made to the scholarly literature, the absence of a historical focus obscures from us important aspects of early Shaker development. For although Henney rightly points out the significance of a 1912 ordinance as an instrument which local authorities utilized to prosecute the Shakers up to the 1930s, we are nonetheless left with an incomplete understanding of the politics of the emergence, working, and finally relaxation of the ordinance.¹

The present paper utilizes the vast trove of extant correspondence between local officials and their superiors in Great Britain to help provide a more complete understanding of this important aspect of Shakers, and St. Vincent, history between 1900 and 1934. It argues that Colonial Office officials always had doubts about the efficacy of legislating on such a potentially explosive issue which could interfere with religious liberties. Overzealous local officials, having initially concealed from their superiors their

¹ Jeannette H. Henney, "The Shakers of St. Vincent: A Stable Religion," in Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change, Erika Bourguignon, (ed.), (Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1973), 219-263.

plans to initiate legislation, ultimately sent forward copies of the ordinance after it had been passed and approved by the acting governor. Because of the conditional approval the ordinance received from British officials, local administrators subsequently consistently campaigned to keep the legislation in place permanently in the mistaken belief that it would lead to an eradication of Shakerism. The sharp increase of prosecutions in the early 1930s confirmed the oft-expressed views of officials at the Colonial Office that Shakerism had firm roots in the colony and could not be eliminated by legislation. Further, their concern that the ordinance might be perceived as an intrusion by government in religious liberty increased significantly when some Shakers started sending to Britain petitions claiming religious persecution. Thus, even at the height of a campaign of prosecution, local officials were forced to soften their enforcement of the ordinance both because of directives from London as well as the exigencies of the local economic climate.

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In a confidential letter written August 25, 1908, to P.C. Cork, Acting Governor of the Windward Islands, Edward J. Cameron, Administrator of St. Vincent, forwarded to his superiors a report of the island's Chief of Police on Shaker "Praise Houses" then existing on the island. Also enclosed in Cameron's letter was a voluminous correspondence and other literature on what authorities perceived to be societal problems generated by Shakerism and Shaker practices among the island's large population of African ancestry. Moreover, the inability of local authorities to determine definitively whether Shakerism should be regarded as a religion, cult, or simply a prosecutable public nuisance, coupled with the fact that they never understood fully its meaning to its adherents, intensified the predicament of the administrator. Although Cameron stopped short of making a specific recommendation as to the course of action he advocated, his enclosure of a copy of a draft ordinance of 1903 aimed at suppressing "any sort of religious meetings after sunset

with the exception of those held by 'recognized religious denominations'" would seem to indicate that he hoped approval would be granted for the introduction of firm legislation to suppress the Shakers once and for all.²

The concern of local authorities in 1908 with the Shakers was not new. As early as 1901, the matter had been raised officially and it was suggested that a law be enacted to deal with this emergent problem. However, the volcanic eruption of 1902 which had devastating consequences for the island both in terms of lives lost, general dislocation, and agricultural decline, as well as the absence from the island of an official law officer, delayed immediate action on this issue. In 1903, Cameron finally drafted an ordinance which was never put into effect because of the sharp criticism it evoked from judicial officers in both St. Vincent and Grenada.

The potency of the arguments advanced by the critics of the draft ordinance, as well as the predicament in which they found themselves in devising an adequate plan of action, became evident in the nature of responses from both the governor and the chief justice of the Windward Islands. Governor Robert Llewelyn, for instance, did not consider Shakerism to be a religion and doubted that stopping "the meetings after dark and on private premises could be considered as interfering with the 'Religious' liberty of the subject." But, he wondered, "on what grounds could we stop 'Meetings'. No doubt in Towns they would be a Public Nuisance--but in sparsely populated St. Vincent that could not be proved. 'Wakes' and such like Meetings are prohibited after midnight--but these Shaker Meetings start at 8 P.M. or directly after dark."³ Though obviously convinced that some form of action should be taken to suppress the Shakers, Llewelyn was clearly sensitive to the political implications of the proposed ordinance.

² Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office (hereinafter C.O.) 321/243, P.C. Cork to The Right Honourable Earl of Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908, (with enclosures).

³ Governor [Llewelyn] to Chief Justice [Tarring], Grenada, April 20, 1904, in Cork to Crewe, Sept. 6, 1908. Wakes and other meetings were regulated by a law of 1869.

While recognizing Llewelyn's desire to eradicate Shakerism, Chief Justice Charles James Tarring of Grenada likewise doubted that Cameron's draft ordinance was the right way to proceed. His view was that the Secretary of State would disallow any ordinance aimed at "regulating the gathering of persons for religious purposes" or empowering the governor in council to "grant a license to hold, convene, or organize meetings and services for religious purposes to the representative of any religious denomination." Further, Tarring doubted that the Secretary of State would be willing to approve such an ordinance which could evoke much adverse public opinion in Britain if the issue were raised in parliament. At the local level, various religious bodies which were exempted might object to being associated however remotely or indirectly with such an ordinance which struck at the heart of religious liberty. Tarring reasoned that any legislation proposed should "strike at the thing not the name." Agreeing somewhat with Llewelyn that Shakerism was not a religion, apparently because its practices "are allied to African fetish worship", he cautioned against legislating as if it were a religion. "If the evil can be legislated against at all", he opined, "I think it must be dealt with as a nuisance or as disorderly behaviour. But I expect it will not be easy to get in at it. Even prostitution is not a crime by English law, though keeping disorderly houses and affording opportunities for it are."⁴

His position being strengthened that Shakerism did not fit into the category of a religion--by which he and other local officials with their Eurocentric perspectives and values clearly meant Judeo-Christian religious tradition--Llewelyn concluded that it was nothing "but a degrading practice followed at Meetings which are more or less disorderly and on that account a Public Nuisance." Accordingly, he encouraged Cameron to utilize some of the provisions of the Summary Offences Ordinance of 1880. If the various offences mentioned did not cover what the Shakers were

⁴Chief Justice Charles James Tarring to Governor [Llewelyn], April 4, 1904, in Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908.

doing, Cameron was to seek an amendment of the Ordinance making it an offence:

"To hold meetings of any sort after dark in any public place or in any open yard, or to sing or utter within hearing of any public place any words of a profane character or to dance or postulate in any assembly of five or more persons in any public place, open space or house or building in an obscene or violent manner.

"Every occupier of any house, building, yard or any place, who without a license from the Chief of Police permits any meeting of five or more persons to take place where profane songs are sung or words uttered loud enough to be heard more than 10 yards from the house, or permits any persons to dance or postulate in any obscene or violent manner, shall be guilty of an offence and if repeated the occupier will be imprisoned without the option of a fine."⁵

Cameron's rebuff and obvious discomfiture with his superior's definition of Shakerism and Shaker practices, apparently explains why he took no legal action along the lines Llewelyn suggested. Moreover, some local officials seem to have believed that "Shakerism as practiced in St. Vincent will die out with better times but the Clergy will have to be more active."⁶ The implication was that Shakerism flourished among workers adversely affected by deteriorating economic circumstances and in a climate of indifference by traditional religious leaders. Rather than die out, however, it appears that the Shaker following actually grew in the first decade of the twentieth century.

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The 1908 "Return showing number and description of "Praise Houses" or Shaker Lodges in the Colony," dated July 17, 1908, lists

⁵ C.O. 321/243, Governor [Llewelyn] to Administrator [Cameron], in Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908.

⁶C.O. 321/243, Cameron to Cork, Aug, 25, 1908, in Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908.

thirty-eight separate establishments on the island. Kingstown and the villages surrounding it accounted for twenty-three of these houses/lodges, with Mesopotamia alone having a total of eleven. The Shakers enjoyed fairly wide popular support among laborers throughout the island, with communities being scattered along the eastern coast as far north as Georgetown, and along the leeward coast as far north as Chateaubelair. Most of the meeting places were described as being wattled buildings with thatched roof, no doors, and "specially erected for purpose." The only exceptions were at Barrouallie, where meetings were held at the home of the leader, George Anderson; at Kingstown, where Mrs. Forbes, the leader of one of the communities in Cane Garden Road, utilized the lower story of her house for meetings; and in Mesopotamia where meetings were held in a board and shingled house owned by the leader, Mrs. Elizabeth Cuffy.⁷ The fact that at least 90 per cent of these communities had meeting places specifically established for that purpose would seem to indicate that theirs were thriving communities with a certain amount of permanence.

According to a contemporary, Dr. C[hristian].W[illiam]. Branch, these early Shakers, who also called themselves the "Converted" or the "Penitents," rather than aiming at establishing independent sects, permitted their members to remain attached to their traditional religious body.⁸ The police report mentioned earlier lists some four Shaker leaders as being Roman Catholics, while remaining silent on the others. It may just be that these individuals felt that somehow their traditional religious entities were not adequately meeting their spiritual and emotional needs. Brother C. Ragguet, who headed the Mt. Bentnick community in the Georgetown

⁷"Return showing number and description of "Praise Houses" or Shaker Lodges in the Colony," sgd. F.W. Griffith, Chief of Police, Enclosure 2 in Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908.

⁸ Dr. C.W. Branch, "The Endemic Religious Insanity of the Island of St. Vincent," The Monist, (Vol. 17, 1907), 299-310. A copy of this article was also enclosed in Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908. Dr. Branch, who for some time was in charge of the hospital in St. Vincent, claimed to have observed closely the group and obtained information about it from the leader of the Georgetown community, Brother Ragguet.

locale and was listed as being "A Preacher of the fanatic type",⁹ reportedly referred to himself as being "an angel upon earth", "the apostle of the Work" in the island, and preached in two praise houses as well as "in the streets and market-places."

Praise houses were present in each community and provided regular meeting places for services which were held mostly on Sundays. "Penance houses," contrastingly, served specialized functions for aspirants or the newly converted, and were to be found primarily in areas with a large community or in the neighborhood of a teacher. Typically, these consisted either of separate rooms for members of the two sexes, or distinctly separate huts. Persons desirous of joining were to spend a period of "moanin" in the penance house, the experience being described as "on the knee" or "bruising the knee." During this period of "moanin," the applicant/aspirant/initiatee reviewed and repented of all his/her sins and also travelled in his/her visions. After coming "off the knee" the initiate wore a white band around the head for about a month, and was to be at home at mid-day during a corresponding period to "rejoice," a circumstance which apparently led to the emergence of small bands of members on the highway "jumping together and shouting 'Hip Houi.'"

During regular meetings, a good deal of singing, jumping, shouting, and dancing took place as members "worked the spirit." Occasionally, members would form a procession around the room "stooping forwards and shouting and jumping," a process referred to as "riding Zion's donkey." Outsiders who participated in the rejoicing and some individuals who had "fallen out of line" would be thrown to the ground in an unconscious state, while those "that get the right spirit may jump and shout in the same spot all night."¹⁰ While disagreement existed among the Shakers as to whether the responsibility for throwing an individual to the ground rested with God or the Devil, all agreed that once on the ground grovelling,

⁹ C.O. 321/243, "Return showing number and description...."

¹⁰Branch, "Endemic Religious Insanity," 304. Although Branch constantly used the word "moanin" in his article, he was obviously confusing it with "mourning" which had to do with the nature of the ceremony rather than the sound uttered by the practitioners.

kicking, and convulsions took place, and much praying and a special ceremony by members present were necessary until the individual regained consciousness.

While local authorities may have been alarmed by the inroads the Shakers were making on territory normally reserved for the acculturating efforts of Anglicans, Methodists, and Roman Catholics, they claimed that their chief objection to Shakerism was its alleged contribution to insanity. Because Branch had served for some time as Medical Officer in charge of the Colony Hospital in Kingstown and was regarded in the local community as an expert on a wide range of medical issues, his views carried considerable weight in an island where he also was of some social standing. In this regard, his publication may well have provided authorities with additional ammunition to push for the eradication of the Shakers. For Branch argued that "the psychical phenomena of Shakerism are due to hysteria and hypnotism and take their coloring from the religious enthusiasm of which they are a degeneration." The most objectionable feature, present especially during the period of "moaning," was "the abuse of hypnotism, which increases the susceptibility of the subject to suggestion and enhances the tendency to hysteria. It may be questioned also whether the influence of the teachers acquired by these means and the slavish credulity of the converts are desirable elements in the mental life of the people." Seeking to locate the presumed effects of Shaker practices within a larger framework, Branch added that "the phenomena of the rejoicing are those of many of the epidemics of insanity, which from the earliest times have been known to spring from or be associated with religion. The leaping and shouting, the delirium and incoherent ejaculations, the flagellations and convulsions all have their parallels in the history of epidemic insanity."¹¹

¹¹ Ibid, 305. The high regard in which Branch was held as a medical authority can be seen from the fact that he was selected to be St. Vincent's representative at a Quarantine Conference held in Barbados, April 25 to May 6, 1904. He seems also to have had a keen interest in archeology, having written an article on Carib artifacts and writings in St. Vincent for the St. Vincent Handbook. See, The St. Vincent Handbook, (Kingstown, St. Vincent, 1937?), 262.

Robert M. Anderson,
Compiler

Lest any doubt remain about the injurious effects of Shaker activities on its practitioners, Branch pointed out that the "dazed stupefied condition" observed in candidates after they were discharged from the penance house was partly due to "that preoccupation of mind which...often occurs during the conversion period of young persons. But in the penitents it would be undoubtedly accentuated by the repeated and prolonged hypnotism they have undergone." Branch's observations above were clearly aimed at rationalizing assertions in official circles in St. Vincent that a large proportion of persons committed for lunacy in the island were Shakers. In the absence of statistics to support this viewpoint, Branch invoked as an authority a former dispenser at the local hospital who informed him that he knew of three such cases, and a police corporal who also had been in charge of two.¹² Assuming the evidence of these individuals is accurate, we are still uncertain as to whether or not the above cases amounted to three or five! Yet the view widely held by Eurocentric local officials, merchants, and planters alike was that a clear nexus existed between Shaker practices and lunacy. To this extent, Branch may well have drawn on this climate of opinion and/or lent some credibility to it by his writings.

Criticism of the Shakers extended beyond the above-mentioned arguments that Shakerism contributed to insanity, the treatment of which required additional governmental expenditure.¹³ Employers complained that Shaker practices interfered with the performance of work of the laboring population. The reference undoubtedly was to the fact that members would have been unable to perform at full capacity when they reported to work after having spent the greater portion of the preceding night in the praise houses. The initiation ceremonies also required initiates to spend as much as a week to

¹²Ibid, 306-307.

¹³Despite the constant complaints of St. Vincent authorities, it turned out that the rate of lunacy in the island was lowest of all the Windward islands. While St. Vincent's rate was .073%, the other islands' stood at .10. As Acting Governor Cork correctly remarked, "if Shakerism is the cause of lunacy in St. Vincent other influences are quite as potent, or more so, in the other Islands." Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908, C.O.

ten days in seclusion "on the knees." Indeed, Administrator Cameron reported that he "came across a young working lad in the country, who told me he had been kept 13 days 'on the knee' undergoing initiation," while the Inspector of Schools noted in his Education Report for 1902-1903 that a Primary School pupil had been unable to take an examination because of time spent in the penance house.¹⁴

Implicit in much of the criticism, however, was a certain amount of unease with practices about which the authorities knew very little. The constant complaint was that the practitioners were engaging in worship "more suited to savages than to dwellers in a Christian land." The "St. Vincent Times" carried an article in which the writer called on government to introduce legislation "giving the police power to break up all such meetings, prosecute the leaders and to destroy buildings...devoted to the holding of these orgies."¹⁵ Despite such a massive and carefully orchestrated local campaign for the elimination of the Shakers through legislation, Acting Governor Cork's recommendation to the Secretary of State against the introduction of any law which, he argued, would be ineffective and likely to make martyrs of the Shakers found favor with his superiors.¹⁶ An Acting Governor based in St. Lucia and a Secretary of State in England had risen above the heady emotionalism and religious and racial in the island to stymie for the time being local efforts to suppress the Shakers.

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The uneasy truce between the Shakers and local authorities was shattered on September 3, 1912 when the island's Council unanimously passed "An Ordinance to render illegal the practices of Shakerism as indulged in the Colony of St. Vincent." This ordinance clearly was the brainchild of C. Gideon Murray, who had replaced

¹⁴C.O. 321/243, Cameron to Cork, (Confidential), Aug. 25, 1908, in Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908.

¹⁵"St. Vincent Times," June 25, 1908. A copy of this article can be found in C.O. 321/243, Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept. 6, 1908.

¹⁶ C.O. 321/243, Cork to Crewe, (Confidential), Sept.. 6, 1908.

Cameron as administrator in May, 1909, following the latter's transfer to St. Lucia.¹⁷ Adhering to the notion that officials could identify Shaker meetings when they saw them, the ordinance provided "the definition of a 'Shakers Meeting' and a 'Shaker House' so far as it has been thought expedient to define these two expressions." As Robert E. Noble, Acting Chief Justice of St. Vincent, remarked, although it might prove difficult for magistrates in England to render judgement if confronted with a charge under the ordinance, "Shakerism and its attendant practices are so well known in St. Vincent that any Magistrate here would have little difficulty in coming to a right conclusion on the evidence adduced in any case brought before him."¹⁸ In the hope that swift and decisive action would put a stop to Shakerism, the magistrate's decision as to what constituted Shakers meeting was to be final.

The ordinance specified that "no person shall take part in a Shakers Meeting or shall be shut up for the purpose of initiation into the ceremonies of Shakerism or erect or maintain a Shakers House." Further, any plantation manager who permitted knowingly "Shaker Meetings to be held or Shaker Houses to be erected on any land over which he has control" was to be fined £50 or imprisoned for six months. Reportedly, this provision was warmly received by the managers "who have been at the mercy of the Shakers, as with no law to back them up, they have been unable to interfere with meetings owing to the consequent trouble with their labourers when they did so." Finally, the ordinance empowered the police to enter without a warrant any Shakers Meetings or Houses for the purpose of taking the names of those present with a view to subsequent prosecution. The police also obtained power of arrest if individuals refused to furnish their names on demand.¹⁹

How does one account for the speedy and relatively smooth passage in 1912 of an ordinance which had encountered so much opposition some four years earlier? Part of the answer lies in the

¹⁷ C.O. 321/269, Cameron to Rt. Hon. Lewis Harcourt, Oct. 24, 1912.

¹⁸ C.O. 321/269, "Law Officer's Report on The Shakerism Prohibition Ordinance, 1912," in Cameron to Harcourt, Oct. 24, 1912.

¹⁹ *Idem*.

administrative changes which the island experienced during the intervening period, which proved conducive to different strategies for dealing with the matter. While in 1908 Acting Governor Cork had successfully opposed Administrator Cameron's recommendation for legislation, by 1912 Cameron who was then Acting Governor of the Windward Islands, was able to utilize his considerable knowledge of St. Vincent to influence legislation and other matters in which he took a keen interest. The post of Administrator of St. Vincent was held in 1912 by Gideon Murray, who proved equally committed to eradicating the Shakers as had Cameron in 1908. Indeed, Murray unabashedly admitted that he had considered the issue fully for three years and had no fear that the forcible repression of the Shakers would result in their being perceived as martyrs.²⁰ Also, amidst the protests and uncertainty in 1908 surrounding the proposed integration of St. Vincent's legal system with Grenada's, the administrator was without the services of a local legal advisor. By 1912, Murray had a Chief Justice to whom he could turn for advice on an ongoing basis. Nowhere was this last factor more apparent than in the different strategies employed by both administrators in furthering their legislative agendas.

While it is difficult to determine the precise time when Murray concluded that legislation was necessary, he doubtless had been examining the situation for some time. Unbeknownst to Governor Sir James Sadler, on July 2, 1912, Murray introduced into the legislature a proposal for legislation. Having learned about these developments on July 31 through a local newspaper, Sadler enquired of Murray as to the correctness of the report, which was indeed confirmed. But Murray's response arrived on the very day Sadler was leaving, and he left no instructions for the guidance of his successor, who happened to be Cameron. Fortuitously, Cameron had been briefed of his actions by Murray--if indeed any briefing was necessary--when the former passed through St. Vincent on July 31. Admitting in his own defense that "it would be inexpedient to do

²⁰ C.O. 321/269, Murray to Cameron, Oct. 12, 1912, in Cameron to Harcourt, Oct. 24, 1912.

anything that might delay in any way the fulfillment" of Murray's actions for fear it "might have impaired the vigour of the action and militated against its object," Murray argued that his knowledge of "the extent and prejudicial effects to the Colony of the Shaker evil" and the fact that he saw nothing objectionable with the ordinance enabled him to assent to it without reference to the Secretary of State.²¹ It is difficult to believe that Murray had not seen the correspondence between Cameron and Llewelyn. As a party to the earlier proposal which Governor Cork had failed to approve, Cameron must have realized the gravity of proceeding without consulting the Secretary of State. The most logical explanation for his behavior is that he eagerly grasped the opportunity afforded by the timing of the legislation to achieve a goal that had eluded him some four years earlier. It is even tempting to speculate that both Murray and Cameron might have cooperated in developing a strategy which bore fruition precisely at the time that Cameron acted as governor.

In any event, the introduction of legislation seems to have polarized the society even further. Murray gleefully admitted that he had received "what I can only term as a regular electioneering campaign going on against Shakerism and its tenets all over the Colony from the pulpit, in the press, in the primary schools, on the estates, both private and Land Settlement, and in the Police Stations, in fact no effort has been spared to bring the provisions and penalties of the Ordinance now passed to the notice of all and especially of Shakers or "Penitents" as they often call themselves." The full force of the state machinery was effectively unleashed against the Shakers as the authorities launched a massive campaign aimed at cowing them into compliance. Faced as they were with such persecution, the Shakers sought an accommodation of sorts with government, and some either denied their involvement with the group or went underground. Murray reported that he had "received Shaker deputations from every quarter of the Colony and have personally interviewed probably all the leaders of the movement from the Bishop downwards....Most of them, except the Bishop, have

²¹ C.O. 321/269, Cameron to Harcourt, Oct. 22, 1912.

protested their innocence of any participation in such an abhorred practice as Shakerism. I have informed all these people...that the Government has no intention of interfering with decent orderly prayer meetings conducted at a proper time in the evening, but that Shakerism as it is known in St. Vincent will be put down with a firm hand."²²

While the legislation in the short run resulted in the closing of a number of Shaker Praise Houses and the prosecution of some practitioners, it never achieved its larger objective of eradicating Shakerism. Between July and early September, 1912, during which time the ordinance was under the consideration of the legislature and when the public campaign against the Shakers was in full swing, the number of Shaker Houses still open had fallen drastically from forty to four. Even so, Murray reported that although no law was yet in force, these four which remained open were "carrying on their 'jumping' meetings surreptitiously when they know, or believe, that the Police are not in the vicinity. Now that the Bill is law I expect that in a few weeks these lodges will likewise be closed down and that Shakerism in St. Vincent will be as dead as mutton."²³

One month after the ordinance went into effect, with an obvious degree of premature satisfaction Murray noted that only one meeting had been held and this at a lodge which had not been served with a copy of the law. If this is so, it clearly indicates that the Shakers were not only aware of the law, but had chosen to meet at the single site where the authorities had failed to post copies of the ordinance. For although the chief of police had asserted that after the passing of the ordinance the police had posted copies on all police stations, lodges, and other places known as Shaker meeting places, the single meeting was held at Diamond Village in the windward part of the island, a site listed in the 1908 return.²⁴ For the moment, the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians,

²² C.O. 321/269, Murray to Cameron, Oct. 12, 1912, in Cameron to Harcourt, Oct. 24, 1912

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ C.O. 321/269, F.W. Griffith to Murray, Oct. 22, 1912, in Cameron to Harcourt, Oct. 24, 1912. Despite Griffith's claim, Murray asserted that they had failed to post the notice at this site.

Methodists, and the press, all of whom had reportedly tendered warm statements of support for Murray's handling of the situation, obviously obtained some comfort in the knowledge that their denominations were using former Shaker Houses for their form of divine worship.

Whatever reservations the Colonial Office might have had about the efficacy of this ordinance were rendered to little effect because of the lack of input they had in the finished product. Indeed, Cameron had forwarded a copy of the ordinance and the relevant supplementary papers in response to an enquiry from Harcourt. While officials in the Office agreed that the "Lt. Gov. [Murray] acted very hastily in not consulting with the Governor," Harcourt nonetheless decided to "leave the Ordinance to operate for one year, after/which we need further report on its working and effect."²⁵ This somewhat tepid response seems to suggest that leaving the ordinance to its operation was the lesser of two evils. Given the overwhelming support which the measure enjoyed from a large cross section of the "respectable" community, the feeling clearly was that it was pointless to risk political fallout by rescinding the ordinance. Few Shakers would have agreed with that reasoning, however.

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The first year's working of the ordinance witnessed a rather grim picture of intimidation, suppression, and persecution of the Shakers. In February 1913 six persons were prosecuted for participating in a meeting at Questelles Village. It appears that when the police entered the house shortly after 10.00 P.M., they found about twenty persons inside dancing in a ring, "emitting occasionally curious grunting noises 'like a flock of goats,' then singing, not in words, but to a well-known hymn-tune making inarticulate sounds. Those composing the ring as they danced sprang into the air clapping their hands at the same time. The only

²⁵ C.O. 321/269, Harcourt to Cameron, Dec. 12, 1912, in Cameron to Harcourt, Oct. 24, 1912.

intelligible sound which were occasionally heard were a few words "The Water Wheel of Zion." As the anonymous writer of a Colonial Office minute remarked, the offenders had not "gone very far at the time the meeting was broken up." Yet five of the six persons charged were convicted, of whom three were fined sums ranging from twenty to thirty shillings, payable within seven days, or face imprisonment of fourteen days to one month with hard labor. The presiding magistrate utilized the trial to lecture the defendants on the "evil nature of the offence--its demoralizing effects,--its consequences to themselves...and impressed on them that the government were determined to put down strongly what was a blot on the civilization of St. Vincent."²⁶ The authorities were clearly using the power of the state available to them to harass the Shakers into submission.

In a report submitted in October, 1913, Murray, who had taken such a keen interest in promoting the ordinance, expressed the view that it was working satisfactorily. He reported that Shaker practices were apparently suppressed in the Windward and Central Districts of the island, though in the Leeward "sporadic cases still occur which prove that there is still a hankering in the minds of some of the more illiterate of the community for this pernicious and harmful form of divertissement." With an obvious degree of premature satisfaction, one magistrate remarked that since the passage of the ordinance "one does not now hear of this diabolical form of worship" and that "in some villages on the land where Shakers Meeting Houses stood dwelling houses are now seen." The magistrate in the Leeward District also reported a decrease in Shakerism. He had tried three cases, one as recently as that same month in which nineteen persons were issued fines ranging from 2 to 5 or prison sentences of one to two months. He proudly remarked that he always said in court "what I know for certain is that in this colony there follows in the wake of Shakerism Meetings physical disorder and sexual immorality causing mischief to the minds and bodies of Vincelonians and that the Government has an undoubted

²⁶ C.O. 321/273, R.B.B. to Murray, Feb. 2, 1913, in Sadler to Harcourt, Feb. 28, 1913.

duty to suppress it. I intend to do so...." Although all three magistrates expressed optimism that Shakerism was being eliminated, it should come as no surprise that they urged that the ordinance be kept in place. Their position was echoed by Murray and Edward Drayton, then acting governor of the Windwards. Not wishing urged that the ordinance be continued "especially as there is no proof that the ordinance interferes with the religious liberty of the subject." Drayton, who had previously served in St. Vincent in a number of capacities, including that of administrator, drew on his personal knowledge and "on the spot inquiries" while he worked there to categorize the "disgusting practices" of the Shakers as some which required continued "prohibitive legislation...in the true interest of the poorer classes, who were being degraded and demoralized in the most pitiable manner by those debasing psychic practices." With such overwhelming support for the ordinance coming from the various officials, Harcourt allowed its continuance indefinitely.²⁷

Despite the fact that official reports from the island between 1915 and 1920 indicated that after February 1914 there was an absence of prosecutions under the Shakers Prevention Ordinance, the question of removing the law was not broached in any official correspondence. This may very well reflect a realization on the part of local authorities that while they had succeeded in criminalizing Shakerism, they had not really eradicated it completely.²⁸ That the Shaker beliefs and practices were alive and well can be seen from the fact that in 1920 there were suddenly nine convictions on the island. Eight of these were in the Camden Park district, just outside Kingstown on the Leeward part of the island. Maintaining an air of optimism, Administrator Henry Popham Lobb claimed that "it is only

²⁷ C.O. 321/274, Drayton to Harcourt, Oct. 11, 1913, (with enclosures).

²⁸ See, for example, C.O. 321/284, Haddon Smith to Harcourt, March 8, 1915, and 321/291, Haddon Smith to Law, May 6, 1916. In 1915, Murray declared that "the magistrates and the acting chief of police unanimously report that 'Shakerism is no longer practised in the Colony' as far as they can determine, while one year later Haddon Smith remarked that "it may be regarded as certain that the cult has been suppressed."

in that area that the practice still exists to any considerable extent, though it is believed to have a few adherents at Belair and Arnos Vale" on the windward side of the island an about the same distance as Camden Park from Kingstown. Reporting that the Camden Park area was being held under heavy surveillance, Lobb hoped "to eradicate it [Shakerism] completely soon."²⁹

That his optimism too was similarly misplaced is reflected in the fact that the following year likewise witnessed an increase in prosecutions. The Second Magisterial District accounted for all nineteen prosecutions, with nine of these resulting in convictions carrying fines aggregating £210 or three years imprisonment with hard labor. Whether out of a desire to be martyrs or because they were unable to pay the fines, all those convicted "elected" to go to jail. Among those convicted was "the High Priestess of the Cult, 'Sister Lyddeatte,' a missionary from Antigua who had been earning a good income by baptizing converts at two shillings per head. She returned to Antigua at the expiration of her term of imprisonment." Disregarding the true meaning of the statistics, that the increase in Shaker prosecutions was the result of a resurgence of the movement rather than of increased policing, Lobb still clung doggedly to the view that "the result of these proceedings has been to kill the practice for the time being, and it is doubtful whether it will be revived." The anonymous writer of the Colonial Office minute obviously better grasped the situation when he penned: "Mr. Lobb should know better. Shakerism will survive for generations."³⁰

The accuracy of this latter prediction is borne out by the startling increase in the number of convictions after 1922. In 1923 alone, the total convicted had soared to twenty-three, falling to eighteen in 1925 and then rising to twenty-two in 1927. Only one person was convicted for each of the years 1926, 1930, and 1931, while there were no convictions in 1928, 1929, and 1932. The presence of an alarmingly high thirty-five convictions in 1933 was

²⁹ C.O. 321/318, Lobb to Haddon Smith, Jan. 26, 1921, in Haddon Smith to Milner, Jan. 31, 1921.

³⁰ C.O. 321/322, Lobb to Haddon Smith, Feb. 25, 1922, in Haddon Smith to Churchill, March 3, 1922.

followed by 94 prosecutions in 1934 and fourteen convictions in 1935. Amidst the obvious increase in Shaker activity, this sudden upsurge in prosecutions and convictions was so great and irritating to the Shakers that one group felt constrained to forward a petition addressed to the British king complaining that they were being prevented from worshipping when and how they pleased, and requesting that they be granted "a free written pass sign[ed] by your own hands" allowing them to "magnify the name of the Lord [in] any way." Of special importance to us is the fact that the signer of the petition, Hilton Fiffe of Barrouallie, had been fined in 1913 under the Shaker Ordinance, and was still a "practicing" member of the movement even though he had been prosecuted in 1933.³¹ While the ordinance was an irritant bred and nurtured through the alarmist view which local authorities had taken of the situation from 1909 onwards, it failed abysmally to suppress and eradicate the Shakers.

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The outbreak of massive labor disturbances throughout the British Caribbean in the 1930s, and specifically in St. Vincent in 1935, distracted for a while local leaders from their avowed mission of curtailing the Shakers. Dwindling governmental resources during these years of economic depression had to be directed to quell the social unrest. Moreover, that Fiffe's petition to the King had made its way to Britain without the knowledge of the administrator, through whom such petitions would normally be forwarded, brought home to officials at the Colonial Office their constant fear that the intent and impact of an ordinance which interfered with religious liberties might be a matter of public knowledge in Britain and ultimately debated in parliament.

³¹ C.O. 321/359/36241/1, Robert A. Swan, Law Officer's Department, to Undersecretary of State, Colonial Office, March 9, 1934, (with enclosure). Also, Cunliffe Lister to Officer Administering the Government of St. Vincent, April 24, 1934. Colonial Office minutes on the petition demonstrate that though officials in the Colonial Office recognize that the Shakers had indeed broken the law, they doubted if such an ordinance should have been approved in the first place.

At no time did officials on either side of the Atlantic admit that Shakerism was a religion. To do so would have undermined the basis on which the law existed in the first place. Local officials steeped in racial and religious bigotry and insensitivity masked their actions on the mistaken notion that Shaker practices were injurious to the health of the practitioners. What they dared not admit and apparently failed to see was that Shakerism, as was the case with a number of other religious revival movements which found expression in the Caribbean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth, was not simply drawing on a distinctly Caribbean folk tradition but was itself a product of an outmoded political and social system. Through these religious movements, the adherents of Shakerism were taking charge of their lives, establishing their own institutions, and seeking to add new meaning to their sojourn in the land.