Fraud, Vagrancy and the “Pretended” Exercise of Supernatural Powers

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Abstract

By the early twentieth century, Britain and all of its Atlantic colonies prohibited the “pretended” use of supernatural powers or rituals such as fortunetelling, obeah, sorcery, and witchcraft. Legislators and others policymakers throughout the Anglophone Atlantic justified these proscriptions using similar narratives; they described occult practitioners as charlatans and vagabonds. Metropolitan and colonial laws also contained comparable language and, superficially, the latter appear to have been an extension of British domestic policies. However, through an in-depth comparison of the legislation regarding supernatural practices and its enforcement, I argue that there were substantial differences between the prohibition and prosecution of these rituals in Britain and its colonies.