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# The Problem of Witchcraft, Slavery and Jesuits in Seventeenth-century New Granada

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ANDREW REDDEN

*University of Liverpool*



## **Abstract**

This article analyses a series of seventeenth-century inquisitorial witchcraft trials involving enslaved and free Africans that took place in the Viceroyalty of New Granada. It discusses the methodological problems inherent in the study of texts that appear to demonstrate the imposition of a stereotypical formula onto the reality of the defendants. It will also examine two further possible lines of enquiry: the role, in particular, of Jesuit intermediaries and interpreters in the trial process; and what, if anything, we might infer from the trials about African socio-religious practices in Early Modern New Granada. Despite the obscuring role of European witchcraft stereotypes, the Cartagena trial testimonies still hint at a slave society that could and did come together in a ritual communion aimed at investing individuals and groups with power in a society where Africans were deliberately denied it.

## **Resumen**

Este artículo analiza una serie de procesos inquisitoriales contra la brujería durante el siglo diecisiete en el virreinato de Nueva Granada: los reos eran esclavos y gente de África ya libre. Discute los problemas metodológicos que se pueden encontrar cuando uno estudie textos que demuestran la imposición de estereotipos sobre la realidad de los reos. También examinará dos líneas de investigación más; el papel específico de intermediarios jesuitas y interpretes durante los procesos y, qué se puede inferir de los procesos sobre las prácticas socio-religiosas de los africanos en Nueva Granada durante la época moderna. A pesar del papel oscurantista de los estereotipos de la brujería europea, los testimonios de los procesos de Cartagena aún indica una sociedad esclava que podía reunirse (y sí lo hacía) en una comunión ritual con el fin de obtener poder dentro de una sociedad que trataba de impedirlo.

All magical operations rest, as on a foundation, upon a pact made between the magician and the evil spirit [...] and witches make certain promises that every month or fortnight they will kill a small child by witchcraft i.e. by sucking out its life. (Del Río 2000: 73, 75)

Entering through a window she went to the bed in which Mariquilla, the daughter of Ana Bran was [asleep], and she sucked her through the nostrils thereby killing her. Once she had placed the blood she had sucked out in a gourd she took the three-year-old's body and carried it to the meeting in the company of her sponsor Luis Bañar and stepping up to offer it to the devil he asked her why she did not bring a larger body of an older person for that one was very small. (Hernandez, AHN Inq.: 294v)<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of the seventeenth century, a series of inquisitorial witchcraft trials involving enslaved and free Africans took place in the Viceroyalty of New Granada.<sup>2</sup> The trial testimonies describe a large number of ritual killings and present a vision of witchcraft practices very much in line with the stereotypical witch-hunts of northern Europe. Indeed at certain points in the trial testimonies, the manuscripts appear to be little more than European formulas coercively imposed on the defendants by the inquisitors. The above quotations, for example, juxtaposed as they are, read as if they might have been taken from the same treatise on witchcraft – one that opens with a general proposition followed by supporting evidence from a specific case study. Yet while the former statement was in fact taken from a translation of the sixteenth-century Jesuit Martín del Río's *Disquisitiones magicae*, a work that became one of the most influential treatises on magic in the Early Modern Western world, the latter quotation was taken from a summary of the trial testimony of Ysabel Hernandez, a free African (*horra*) of the Biafra caste who resided in Panama before she was arrested.<sup>3</sup>

Such a correlation between treatise and trial testimony or, in other words, formula and reality, presents a reader with a number of methodological problems, not least because the stereotypical formula that appears over and over again in these trials gives rise to a natural inclination to dismiss them as inquisitorial fabrication imposed on and extracted from vulnerable defendants under conditions of extreme psychological pressure and even torture, and this was certainly the case. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the original trial records for the cases recorded by the Cartagena Inquisition have long been destroyed, and what remains are summaries (some very brief, others more detailed) of the cases prosecuted over a course of a year. These summaries were sent to the Supreme Inquisitorial Council (el Consejo de la Suprema Inquisición)

1 Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.

2 The Cartagena Inquisition was established in 1610 (Splendiani, Sánchez Bohórquez and Luque de Salazar 1997, 1: 111–18, 112).

3 An African's designation of caste in the Hispanic Americas usually depended on his or her port of origin. Ysabel's slave ship would have left from the Bight of Biafra in the Gulf of Guinea. For the *Disquisitiones Magicae*, see Del Río 2000. The first edition was published in 1596. The final edition, on which Del Río was to work, was published in 1608. It was continually reprinted until the mid-eighteenth century.

based originally in Toledo, Castile.<sup>4</sup> The difficulties of reading the history behind the trials are therefore substantially increased as sometimes only vestiges of the original voices remain, given both the formulaic impositions at various levels and the notarial process of summarizing and dispatching the documents to Spain. That said, traces of these voices do remain, and are sometimes quoted directly. Scholars, therefore, are rising to the task of piecing together the surviving fragmentary evidence and working it together with ethnohistorical interpretations to produce imperfect, yet increasingly more complete pictures of the colonial past (see, in particular, Maya Restrepo 2005; McKnight 2004, 2003; Splendiani et al. 1997; Ceballos Gómez 1994). The following essay aims to contribute to this growing body of scholarship.

Between 1614 and 1655 out of 28 cases of slaves or free Africans prosecuted for *brujería* (which literally translates as ‘witchcraft’), *hechicería* (sorcery), or superstition, 23 – an unusually high proportion in relative terms – were prosecuted for *brujería*. Significantly, in these inquisitorial summaries, *brujería* appears to be defined very narrowly along the lines of classical European witchcraft: groups of individuals flying to orgiastic sabbaths involving he-goats, dancing, homicide and perceived sexual perversion. *Hechicería*, on the other hand, appears in the trial summaries as a much looser category, referring to any combination of herbalists, those who use love magic and unorthodox prayers for magical purposes and indigenous shamans, otherwise known as *mohanes*. In one of the few exceptions in these cases of slave prosecutions, rather than being prosecuted for ‘witchcraft’, a slave referred to as ‘Matheo Negro of the Arará Caste’ was accused in 1652 of being a *Mohan* which, in the words of the trial summary, ‘is the same as an *hechicero*’ (Negro, Matheo, AHN Inq.: 304v).<sup>5</sup>

Diana Luz Ceballos Gómez has contrasted the collective nature of *brujería*, in which a number of accused gather to perform diabolical and idolatrous rites, with the usually individual nature of *hechicería*, which is done for specific purposes (Ceballos Gómez 1994: 87; McKnight 2003: 65). This definition might be qualified with an acknowledgement that those accused of *hechicería* (often women) for love magic, and especially for the use of the *Prayer of Santa Martha* –

4 These summary documents are now held in the Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid), Sección Inquisición. For a systematic study of the Cartagena Inquisition between the years 1600 and 1650 see Splendiani et al., 1997, vols. 1–4. Vol. 1 is the academic study, vols. 2 and 3 are annotated transcriptions of the Cartagena trial documents held in Libros 1020 and 1021, while Vol. 4 contains a glossary and three in-depth indices, including an index of defendants. From this work Kathryn Joy McKnight has usefully cited percentage differences of these prosecutions: ‘16 percent are categorized in the documents as *negro* and 11 percent as slaves. About 30 percent of all the accused, regardless of race, were tried for witchcraft or sorcery – *brujería* or *hechicería*’ (Vol. 4, app. figs. 3, 4 and 6) (McKnight 2003: 63).

5 For a comprehensive study of this case see McKnight 2003. He was prosecuted for ‘superstitious’ healing and divination. The case is particularly significant because, as McKnight demonstrates, the prosecution of this one individual demonstrates a three-way transculturation between African, European and indigenous American religious healing practices. See especially McKnight 2003: 73–78.

which called on Saint Martha to bind a man or find an object and bring him or it, helpless, to the woman – learned these prayers and incantations from other women and often practised this magic in small groups. In 1621, for example, Josefa Ruiz, a 40-year old, free Afro-Caribbean woman, stated in her testimony that she had learned the prayer many years before when she was living in the Convent of La Regina in Santo Domingo. If the girls in the convent lost objects such as needles or thimbles they would invoke Saint Martha to find them. More significantly, she continued that for many years she had been passing on and using the incantations ‘with all sorts of women’ as familiarly as if she had been giving them ‘a chicken or money’ (Ruiz, AHN Inq.: 229v–230r).<sup>6</sup>

The boundaries between idolatrous devil worship and diabolical invocation were not always so clear with respect to certain cases classified as *hechicería*, however. In 1614, Maria Ramirez, the wife of Pedro de Avila, a soldier stationed in Cartagena, was prosecuted for *hechicería* and, in particular, for using and teaching others invocations that, with a popular creativity that appeared to reflect Cartagena’s particular socio-historical position, mixed (in Spanish and garbled Latin) the rites of consecration – arguably the most sacred part of the Catholic Mass – and direct diabolical invocation:

Jesus Christ entered through Africa, robed and sacramented and said: *Pax vobis[cum]*.  
[H]oc [e]s[t] [enim] corpus, Christo me[um]s [Peace be with you. This is my body [of] Christ].  
(Ramirez, AHN Inq.: 8v)<sup>7</sup>

My shadow you will take and my dress you will take, and where *fulano* is you will take it and with it you will tie him. And the devils of the square will bring him to me dancing. The devils of the slaughterhouse will bring him to me flying. The devils of the scribes and of the fishermen; the devils of the crossroads, those of the bridge and those of the fountain and [...] of the mountains and valleys, you will all come together. (Noble, AHN Inq.: 9r)<sup>8</sup>

It would seem then, that to a certain degree both *hechicería* and *brujería* as classified by the Cartagena Inquisition had a recognizably collective component

6 This type of female network of *hechicería* can also be seen in inquisitorial cases from Peru and Mexico and was an important social phenomenon in the early modern Hispanic world.

7 The testimony reads: ‘*Jesu Christo entro por Africa Vestido y sacramentado y dijo, pax vobis, oc, us, corpus, Christo meos*’ [sic]. According to the testimony, this invocation was believed to be effective at diminishing someone’s rage. Splendiani et al. suggest that in fact the invocation (and a slightly different but clearly related one that follows it in the trial summary of Isabel Noble (fol. 9r)) is likely to be a badly written conjunction of different prayers (Splendiani et al. 1997, 2: 42, nn. 22 and 25).

8 This excerpt was part of a longer invocation called the ‘wicked little Martha’ ‘*la martilla la mala*’ in a play on words between Saint Martha’s name *Marta* and hammer, *martillo*. The invocations to Santa Marta and to the devils of the rural and urban landscape were part of a canon that was common to the Hispanic World. By the late sixteenth century it would appear that the ‘underground’ transmission network of this particularly female invocation had gone global. For the use of these invocations in Peru see Redden 2008: 148–55; 208–10. To my knowledge a systematic study of the invocation and, in particular, its global Hispanic nature still remains to be done. *Fulano* is the term used by the scribe to refer to a generic name; e.g. ‘I [name/fulano/a] hereby take you [name/fulano/a] to be [...]’, etc.

and also involved direct invocation of devils.<sup>9</sup> Yet, notwithstanding their ritual components, the cases of *hechicería* were not shaped by the inquisitorial interrogators and forced into outrageously stereotypical sabbaths in the same way as the testimonies commonly extracted from slaves during the same period. As Ceballos Gómez points out, the crucial difference, then, must have been one of purpose (both perceived and real). If cases of *hechicería* invoked devils for specific purposes (such as to bind unfaithful men to their partners or to protect women from male violence), thereby acknowledging their power, they attempted to use the devils rather than worship them. Cases of perceived *brujería*, on the other hand, invariably involved homicide or attempted homicide and the perceived function of such harmful acts, and the rites more generally, were less to harness diabolical power than to worship it. This distinction, so marked in the Cartagena Inquisition, begs questions as to why so many slaves were forced to confess to *brujería* (as opposed to *hechicería*); and what, if anything, was happening that could have been misinterpreted so violently by the inquisitorial authorities.

In recognizing the European witchcraft formula, the first problem we face is how to locate the Cartagena trials in a historical schema in which, by contrast to northern Europe, Hispanic inquisitors tended to be quite sceptical of allegations regarding witches and witchcraft in general. One of the watershed cases of this kind in the Hispanic world was that of the persecution of so-called witches in the Basque country that culminated in a penitential *auto de fe* in Logroño, in November 1610.<sup>10</sup> In this *auto* eighteen of the accused were reconciled, and seven deemed to be recalcitrant were executed.<sup>11</sup> A large-scale witch-hunt along the lines of those witnessed in northern Europe was taken over and extinguished by the Inquisition before it could metamorphose into a widespread hysteria. One of the investigating inquisitors, Alonso de Salazar y Frías, became so critical of the testimonies obtained in the previous proceedings that he dismissed the majority of actions attributed to the so-called witches as false (Caro Baroja 1997: 296). The significance of the case of the witches of Zugarramurdi (Logroño) for the Hispanic world, then, was twofold. Firstly, it demonstrated procedural scepticism in the Office of the Inquisition towards claims of witchcraft; and it is important to note that this was not scepticism with regard to the power of the devil to deceive and steal souls, but rather was scepticism towards the mechanics of standard witchcraft stereotypes. The heresy was not so much in doing things that the

9 A similar cursory study of similar cases in the Mexican Inquisition and the Peruvian Inquisition suggests this is common to all Hispanic American inquisitions.

10 An *auto de fe* was a penitential rite and public spectacle in which those accused and convicted by inquisitorial proceedings were either absolved and reconciled (with or without punishment, depending on the sentence), or were executed after being formally handed over to the secular authorities.

11 For seminal studies of this case and its implications, see Caro Baroja 1997: 239–316, and, in particular, Henningsen 2004. For comparative case studies in Galicia, see Lisón Tolosana 1983. Lisón Tolosana carried out a survey of Galician trials and found only one case of execution (1983: 16). See also Lisón Tolosana 1983: 19–20 for examples of inquisitors suspending trials begun locally.

inquisitors knew could not be done (such as flying to sabbaths, shape-changing and the like), but in *believing* that they had done so using the power of the devil. Even though influential treatises such as Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* and Del Río's *Disquisitiones* used Thomistic theology to argue that these things were possible, for the inquisitors, whether or not the accused witches had done these things was not as important as whether they believed they had done them. Such belief meant that they had made an implicit or explicit pact with the devil – as such, their souls were still in the devil's power and needed to be wrested back in a confessional and penitential process.<sup>12</sup>

The second point of significance is that despite the apparent inquisitorial scepticism towards the witches of Zugarramurdi, the tremendous publicity generated by the polemic was such that the events described in the testimonies remained in both religious and popular memory. If a precedent had been set whereby Hispanic inquisitors could approach such cases with relative scepticism, a further precedent had been set in which defendants had actually been convicted on the basis of testimonies shaped around a European formula standardized by the likes of the *Malleus Maleficarum*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in a persuasive study comparing the Logroño witch trials to those of New Granada, Heather White notes that among the conclusions of Salazar y Frías was the notion that witchcraft epidemics could only come about if people were 'instructed' in the formal theological beliefs of witchcraft. Such instruction, whether it had taken place prior to the epidemic or during the trial process itself, would invariably affect the nature of the testimonies given (White 2005: 5). This reasoning logically applies to readings of the Cartagena witch trials, in which, 'the interrogation process served as a kind of coercive catechesis, by which the defendants learned to properly confess themselves as witches' (2005: 6). At the same time, the temporal proximity of the Logroño case only eight years before the first of these witch trials in Cartagena is significant enough to warrant legitimate comparison.

Of course, to say that this particular type of formulaic framework did not exist elsewhere in Spanish America would be a mistake. Laura Lewis documents one such case that occurred near Mexico City (New Spain) in 1598, in which a poor Spanish woman was introduced to what was effectively a European-style coven (Lewis 2003: 128–29). It is important to note, however, that the testimony was provided to the Inquisition by the Spanish woman via a Spanish priest; the fact of European participation in the alleged witchcraft from the beginning sets the case apart from the New Granada slave trials. Significantly, Lewis also notes in this comprehensive study of diverse magical practices in New Spain, that 'this is one of the few reports of a classic Sabbat that [she has] found' (2003: 226, n.

12 On this guarded inquisitorial scepticism in colonial Mexico see Cervantes, 1994: 136–48. For the most comprehensive and recent bilingual edition of Kramer and Sprenger's treatise, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, see Mackay 2006, 2 vols. For an accessible but scholarly English translation see also Mackay 2009. For a comparable case whereby witchcraft trials in northern Italy were influenced by this Germanic formula, see Ginzburg 1992.

13 For the development of demonology and its relation to witchcraft in early modern Europe, see Clark 1997.

105). The vast majority, if not all the other cases she analyses, although diabolized in the process of European reconceptualization, show definitive traces of indigenous or African religious practices; these are often mixed together with descriptions of European magic (especially to influence matters of love), but they are not presented in the stereotypical framework of witches' covens. Similarly, in a study of Afro-Mexican ritual practices, Joan Cameron Bristol also looks at the phenomenon of witchcraft in New Spain and despite the fact that the devil appears with regularity in trials of African subjects involved in magic, stereotypical sabbaths are not present (Bristol 2007).

So where do they exist in the Americas? Fernando Cervantes has noted their presence in the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas, 'filled with devils deemed constantly to be transporting men and women through the air, tempting witches to obtain unbaptized infants for their cannibalistic rites, turning men into beasts, faking miracles and appearing in human and animal forms'. Yet, he continues, 'all these demonic actions were set by Las Casas unquestionably in the context of malefice, and his demonology was more in tune with the Thomist tradition that had inspired the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* than with the nominalist tradition at the root of the demonology that became prevalent after the Reformation' (Cervantes 1994: 32–33).

The seventeenth century, then, was one of ideological transition in the Hispanic World, in which a greater emphasis on the Decalogue prioritized the punishment of involvement with the devil first and foremost because it was idolatrous (Cervantes 1994: 20–24). Experience in the Americas had shown inquisitors and extirpators that idolatry took many different forms, even if the devil was always at the root, so to punish the crime it was not necessary to force it into the rigid stereotypical framework of the witches' sabbath. Those rare cases where the black mass stereotype was superimposed tended to be ones in which malefice was involved. Even then, it is usually possible to discern religious and cultural practices that do not conform to this stereotype.

One such case in Peru took place at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth century and was documented by the Jesuit Pablo José de Arriaga. In his published work, intended primarily for a European audience, he describes how a group of Andean *brujos* or witches preyed on indigenous Christian children by sucking their blood using powers granted to them by the devil (Arriaga 1621: 21–23). In the annual letter written to Rome in 1617, the same events are described in slightly different detail, in which the indigenous religious practitioners confess to killing, but using powers granted to them by the sun god, which is then interpreted by Arriaga as being diabolical (ARSI, Litt. Ann. 1617: 55r–v; Redden 2008: 128–29, 202 n. 26). The point, for the purposes of this essay, is that while interpretations of how the native religious practitioners' power was invested differed, neither side disputed the fact that the killings had taken place. The original conflict, in some form, existed, and it played out between indigenous Andeans – some nativist, some pro-Christian – in an Andean spiritual framework. Only afterwards was it overlaid with more stereotypical European

demonological tropes; the Andean world view is still visible beneath the surface, albeit in a blurred and distorted way. It is my contention in this essay that while the cultures of Africans in New Granada were quite different from those of the Andes, the trials can, in a similar way, demonstrate that a number of different cultural and spiritual processes and conflicts were taking place, notwithstanding the all-pervasive demonological formulas that were superimposed during the inquisitorial process.

It is this approach that will be pursued in the following essay, rather than revisiting comparisons between the trials of Africans in New Granada and Hispano-European witch trials in, say, Zugarramurdi, which has been persuasively done by Heather White (2005). Instead, the purpose of this article is to examine two further possible lines of enquiry: the role of Jesuit intermediaries in the trial process; and what, if anything, we might infer from the trials about African socio-religious practices in Early Modern New Granada. As stated above, due to the nature of the trial testimonies (preserved only in summaries sent to the Supreme Council in Toledo) and the lack of more detailed documentation, both strands of investigation pose challenging methodological problems and the subsequent argument intends to raise further questions in the course of a hypothetical discussion.

Such discussion can only point to the similarities between the Jesuit treatise on magic written by Del Río, and the formulaic framework in the Cartagena witch trials, as useful points of comparison given the fact that various witchcraft and demonological treatises were in circulation in seventeenth-century Hispanic America.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the question might still be asked as to the extent that Jesuits may have influenced the testimonies of these African slaves. According to the trial manuscripts, the Jesuit Pedro Claver (d. 1654), for example, acted as interpreter to the Inquisition during a number of the trials. Notwithstanding this participation, Claver was beatified in 1850 and was canonized in 1888 for his spiritual and pastoral work amongst African slaves in Cartagena. Such pastoral work, focussing as it did on the saving of souls from the ever-present threat of the devil, predicated a double-edged pedagogical sword: one that made use of gentler methods of persuasion but which, when the occasion demanded it, also availed of more coercive systems embedded within the Hispanic colonial world view. A hagiographical account of Claver's life published a year after his canonization mentions how 'when those unfortunate savages, conquered by divine grace and the admirable virtue of the holy Jesuit, embraced the faith, they always maintained certain affection for the diabolical ceremonies of their false religion'. The account continues cryptically, 'it was necessary for Claver to constantly remain vigilant in order to prevent them from returning to their

14 The work of Kramer and Sprenger, for example, was referred to in 1674 by fray Francisco del Risco, the Franciscan exorcist of the possessed Carmelite nuns of Trujillo, Peru (*Monjas de Santa Clara de Trujillo*. AHN Inq., Leg. 1648, Exp. 6: 35r). The less credulous *Reprouacion de las supersticiones y hechizarias*, written in 1530 by Pedro Ciruelo, was also in wide circulation and went through successive editions (see Ciruelo 1978).



ancient practices' (Brioschi 1889: 92).<sup>15</sup> If this vigilance meant that the Jesuits needed to call on a range of different methods within the Hispanic colonial system, including those that were more coercive, it also meant that the system's more coercive institutions could in turn call on the Jesuits from within their soteriological remit to assist in judicial proceedings.<sup>16</sup> In the case of translation, that assistance could, however unwittingly, become a significant influence as inquisitorial questions sometimes had to pass through two interpreters (and Claver, as a trained theologian, was more than likely familiar with treatises like that of Del Río, especially given the fact that key Jesuit writings were circulated around their global network of colleges and seminaries).<sup>17</sup> In 1628, a slave called Anton of the Caravalí nation and referred to as Anton Caravali in the trial summaries, was among those prosecuted for witchcraft. His testimony went through two stages of translation before reaching the ears of the inquisitors. The first translation was carried out by Bartolomé, a slave owned by the Jesuits; the second stage was carried out by Claver in person before finally being received and potentially further interpreted by the prosecutor and inquisitors (Caravali, AHN Inq.: 297r–302r). In the same group of trials, Ysabel Hernandez of the Biafra nation was also prosecuted and testified with the use of Jesuit interpreters:

Because the way she spoke was so unclear and what she said could not be understood very well she was given as interpreters Padre Clavel [sic] of the Society of Jesus, who assists in the catechesis and teaching of the bozal negros [and] Bartolomé Negro of the Biafra nation, a slave in the said [Jesuit] college, and with his [their] assistance, the confession of the said Ysabel Hernandez began. (Hernandez, AHN Inq.: 293r–295r)<sup>18</sup>

### Slaves and Jesuits – A Context

As the point of entry for southern Hispanic America and the Pacific, many thousands of Africans brought from the coasts of West Africa were sold in the slave markets of Cartagena. Estimates (using official trade registers as sources)

- 15 Not surprisingly, the hagiography makes no mention of his collaboration with the Inquisition, although it is important to consider that within the context of his time, such collaboration, if requested, would have been normal. Indeed, to refuse would have been extremely difficult, if not even dangerous. A close comparison with and systematic analysis of the *Procesos de la beatificación y canonización de San Pedro Claver* could shed more light on this collaboration but is beyond the scope of this preliminary essay. See the edition by Aristizabal and Splendiani 2002. See also Vargas Arana 2006: 43–79. On his involvement in the training and use of interpreters see especially pages 65–68.
- 16 For the Inquisition, such assistance could be in the theological classification of particular accusations and testimonies – for example, the Jesuit José de Acosta acted as one of the qualifiers in the trial of the Dominican Francisco de la Cruz, Peru, during the 1570s (Estenssoro Fuchs 2003: 188–89) – or, as in the case of Claver, as an interpreter.
- 17 White briefly notes Claver's mediation (2005: 5). Vargas Arana also notes how that participation caused him to be approached by members of the Portuguese mercantile community anxious to seek advocacy in the case of their persecution during the 1630s and 1640s (2006: 76).
- 18 The term *bozal* refers to newly arrived Africans, who had little to no knowledge of Hispanic culture, religion and language.

suggest that between 1585 and 1610 more than 45,000 were brought to the Americas through the port – the estimate would rise considerably if it were to take into consideration those who were smuggled by slavers who had overstepped the numbers specified by their licences or who had no licence at all (Vidal Ortega 2002: 163–64).<sup>19</sup> Most Africans had no knowledge of Spanish and most when they arrived had little to no knowledge of Christianity (despite the possibility that they might have had a ‘flying baptism’ before being loaded onto the slave ships) and many died en route or shortly after arrival.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, according to Jesuit testimonies, these flying baptisms doled out on the quayside were often misunderstood by the enslaved Africans and at best were considered a welcome remedy for heat stroke or, more negatively, were thought to be a part of the branding ritual as slaves were often branded at the same time as being baptized. At worst, they were feared as, ‘an invention of the whites (which is what they call us) in order to kill them’ (ARSI, Litt. Ann., 1613–16: 100r). Alonso de Sandoval, Pedro de Claver’s Jesuit superior and teacher, was more explicit in his *Treatise on Slavery*, citing collated testimonies that asserted slaves sometimes thought that baptism was a spell that enabled the Spanish to eat them or even turn them into gunpowder (Sandoval 1987: 383).<sup>21</sup> Joan Cameron Bristol makes the point that this was a tragically ‘apt metaphor’ for the horrors that they were about to be forced to undergo, horrors that would consume so many of them (Bristol 2007: 73). While the Jesuit clergy considered these associations to be serious but natural misunderstandings under the circumstances, the links between baptism, transportation and death had a much deeper-rooted significance for the Africans about to be turned into human cargo and embarked on the slave ships.

For the many thousands of West Central Africans who were transported to the Americas, especially from the Kingdom of Kongo, the land of the living was mirrored by that of the dead, called *mpemba*. In this land, the dead moved around in the same shape as they had on earth, but whitened like the clay of a riverbed that carried the same name as the land of the dead itself (MacGaffey 1986: 48, 52). Indeed, the first Portuguese to arrive on the coast of Angola were believed to be visitors from the land of the dead and the king of Portugal was believed to be the King of the BaKongo’s counterpart in that world (MacGaffey 1986: 199). Crucially, these two mirroring halves of the universe were separated by a large body of water – an ocean or a great river – and death itself was an extended journey which took a certain length of time, so much so in fact that the spirits of the dead could linger long enough to participate in their own funerals (1986: 43, 53). Thus, we might speculate how to be captured by slave raiders from enemy ethnic groups and polities, transported to the coast, handed over, made to parti-

19 For comparison, the online Slave Voyages database presents the sum of slaves embarked for Cartagena during the same period as 54,499 while the sum of slaves disembarked in Cartagena was 39,269: see <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces> (accessed 25 March 2011).

20 For the conflicts and controversies regarding the supply routes and mercantile monopolies of slavery in the Spanish Americas, see Bowser 1974: 26–51.

21 For an English translation, see Sandoval 2008: 113.

cipate in a painful and incomprehensible ritual (branding and baptism), and forcibly packed onto slave ships commanded by white humans the colour of clay could be much more than a mere metaphor for death but, in fact, was the reality of the traumatic process of transportation to the land of the dead. True enough, the baptismal rites were quite different from the funeral rites in which they would have participated in their own communities, but within the framework outlined above, these were rites carried out by the dead themselves, the white clergy who lived in the missions attached to the Portuguese trading communities. These 'dead' white priests, then, might easily have been considered the ghostly counterparts of witches who were condemned to wander the infertile grasslands and attack and eat the living (MacGaffey 1986: 73).<sup>22</sup> The slaves' first introduction to Christianity was an horrific affirmation of the belief that they were to journey to the land of the dead and was also a lesson that power in this land could be obtained through the manipulation of ritual witchcraft, a point to which we will be returning below.<sup>23</sup>

The Society of Jesus meanwhile established itself in New Granada in 1604; the priests who were to found the house in Cartagena disembarked from 'the galleons that arrived in July of that year' (ARSI, Litt. Ann., 1605: 14r). By the following year four priests, including Alonso de Sandoval, and one brother were operating in the port-city and the Jesuits made a rough survey of the population to assess its spiritual needs. While acknowledging the malicious gossip that there were 'so many religious orders in such a small space that they must surely all die of hunger', they estimated that at the time of writing (1605) there were more

22 The West Central African context is MacGaffey's, the specific associative links are my own hypothesis. Bristol (2007: 158) and Bennett (2009: 69–70) both highlight the potential significance of the *mpemba* belief. MacGaffey draws attention to the association of the Capuchin monks working as missionaries in the BaKongo with living African religious practitioners (*nganga*) in the seventeenth century, sharing the same vocabulary and engaging in struggles for control of what he argues was (or became) 'the same religion' (MacGaffey 1986: 209). John Thornton, meanwhile, speculates that Portuguese merchants visiting or living on the coast of Angola might also have been considered to be witches and also provides evidence to suggest the association with priests and witches (Thornton 2003: 282, 286).

23 It is worth noting that the Yoruba nations and kingdoms along the northern coast of the Gulf of Guinea (the Bight of Benin) had their own complex religious cosmivision that was, in terms of structure and hierarchy, quite different from the BaKongo of West Central Africa. Bennett draws the reader's attention to this distinction but provides evidence which suggests that even those who had a different world view from the BaKongo and had experienced prolonged cultural contact with Europeans would interpret what they were experiencing in preternatural terms: Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo or Igbo from the Bight of Biafra, who was enslaved in the mid-eighteenth century, believed that he was about to be killed by 'bad spirits' (Bennett 2009: 70). Of course, the geographical location of the Igbo is between the Yoruba Kingdoms and those of West Central Africa, so certain overlap is to be expected. While there is a large body of literature focussing in the late emergence of santeria from the Yoruba religion due to the increased numbers of slaves brought to the Caribbean from that region in the later colonial period, there is much scope for further research on the potential merging of African belief systems in the context of enslavement in the earlier period. For santeria and the Yoruba cosmivision, see, in particular Brandon 1997: 9–31. For a survey of the diaspora caused by the enslavement of Igbo people see (Chambers 1997: 72–97).

than 300 citizens (*vecinos*), 200 soldiers and a further 2,000 more Spaniards, who 'in their service have three or four thousand blacks' and that, Diego de Torres the Father Provincial of the newly established province wrote, 'was just inside the city'. 'Outside and in its environs' he added, 'there were entire populations that were also in need of their ministry' (ARSI, Litt. Ann., 1605: 1r, 14r-v). If the clerical population density in Cartagena was concentrated enough to warrant popular satire, the Jesuits soon found a niche by taking upon themselves a particular duty of care to the slaves. By 1611, six priests were working out of the residence in the city, two of whom dedicated their time to 'the blacks, one who cares for the *ladinos* and the other, more particularly to the half and totally *bozal* who are no less in this land than the Indians [...] due to the fact that this is the port of entry for all those who come to the Indies from Cape Verde, São Tome, Angola and the Rivers of Guinea' (ARSI, Litt. Ann., 1611 y 1612: 90v).

As we have seen, however, primary care from a Jesuit perspective meant particular care 'of their souls', ensuring that they were baptized and beginning programmes of catechesis (although they also administered basic medical care and they and their students attended the sick in the hospital of Cartagena as part of their duties). But the catechesis they could give was often minimal before the slaves were resold and sent to other provinces of the Americas (or before they died of sickness or trauma – whether psychological or physical).

Very quickly, however, the Society was confronted with a polemic, as opposition was raised to the policy of baptizing slaves 'en masse', in part because there was a possibility that they would be re-baptized (having already been nominally baptized in the ports of West Africa) but also because they were being baptized before any proper catechesis had been given. In the early years of the Society's presence in New Granada, the Jesuits found themselves defending a baptismal policy similar to that of the Franciscans shortly after their arrival in New Spain, where urgency was paramount and where they had to trust that the grace of God conferred by the baptism would be sufficient to prevent apostasy or idolatry.<sup>24</sup>

The problem, ultimately, was the difficulty of speedily catechizing in the variety of languages spoken by the recently arrived slaves. The answer was for the Jesuits to use interpreters, who were themselves slaves but who had been working for the Jesuits (and receiving catechesis) over a longer period of time. In this, the methods proposed by Alonso de Sandoval differed markedly from those proposed by José de Acosta, whose systematic guide to the methods of evangelization, *De procuranda indorum salute*, became the gold standard for Jesuit missionary work throughout the Hispanic world (see Acosta 1987). While Acosta insisted that priests should learn the indigenous languages to a standard that would allow proper communication (both for preaching and for hearing confessions), Sandoval pointed to the near impossibility of learning so many African languages, arguing that there was no one who could teach them and

24 See the apologia written by Alonso de Sandoval, 'An modus baptizandi nigros fieri – solitus A sacerdotibus S.J. approbandus sit' (Sandoval, ARSI, ONN, 158: 193–200). The above-cited ARSI Litt. Ann. 1613–16: 94r–107v is an almost exact copy.

that the time they spent with the slaves was not sufficient to allow for language-learning by immersion (Olsen 2004: 68–69). Instead, he recommended that missionaries establish a bank of interpreters for the many African languages present in Cartagena (Olsen 2004: 69). By having this network ready for the purposes of catechesis, Sandoval was putting in place a system by which Claver and the Jesuit slave interpreters could come to the practical aid of the Inquisition while believing they were spiritually aiding the slaves accused of witchcraft.

In the context of saving souls, Jesuits were certainly not averse to slavery, even if it was considered less than ideal. Sandoval himself was ambiguous. After describing the ‘treatment, capture and slavery of these negroes of Guinea and other ports that export slaves to us’, he went on to argue why a slave owner was not obliged to grant his slaves freedom if they were led a good example and if numbers were kept small, but then followed this argument with an exposition of the terrible damage that slavery as an institution caused (Sandoval 1647, I: 93–121). In fact, in certain areas the Jesuit economy was reliant on slaves, who worked the Society’s haciendas in New Granada, New Spain and the coastal region of Peru south of Lima.<sup>25</sup> This Jesuit dependence on and interest in slaves, for the seemingly intertwined purpose of catechesis and economy, can be demonstrated by a further controversy which occurred in the 1650s when the Jesuits in Cartagena received an ambassador from the King of Arda and offered him their hospitality. The King of Arda wished to establish a direct slave trade from his Kingdom to New Granada, cutting out the European middlemen. The Jesuits, meanwhile, seized on this as an opportunity to convert the ambassador and hopefully the King of Arda (and his nation) to Christianity, amid accusations of cynical profiteering from other religious orders (ARSI, Litt. Ann., ‘1655 asta el año de 1660’: 5r–8r).

Such intimacy between Jesuits and the institution of slavery and ultimately between Jesuits and slaves themselves meant that they were in a key position to mediate and even influence the testimonies of witchcraft extracted from slaves over the course of the first half of the seventeenth century.

### The Slavery of Witchcraft: The Trials

Between 1618 and 1642 there were a surprising number of slaves and free Africans accused of satanic witchcraft or *brujería* as opposed to mere *hechicería*, herbalism, or superstition (of which there were also cases, but relatively few). These cases centred on areas where there were relatively large numbers of slaves working in rural haciendas.<sup>26</sup> Superficially the accusations all followed a very similar pattern: that the person accused was taken or took someone else

25 For Jesuits and slaves in New Spain, see Bristol 2007: 41–42, 67, 84–87. For Peru, see Cushner 1975: 177–99. For a recent and comprehensive collection of essays that bring together studies on various regions of Hispanic America, see Negro and Marzal 2005. The anthology also contains two essays on Brazil.

26 Specifically Zaragoza (Antioquia), Tolú (in the coastal region of present-day Sucre), La Pacora (on the Pacific coast of Panama), and Havana (Cuba).

to a gathering far away from any settlements, where they paid homage to a grand figure (seen by the authorities as Lucifer), renounced Christianity and, after kissing the backside of a he-goat, were given a familiar. They then feasted, danced and copulated with their familiars. Some of the accused were supposed to have used ointments that enabled them to fly to the gatherings.

The difficulty with these cases is that more questions can be raised regarding the testimonies and the judicial processes than can actually be solved. If they were the responsibility of a single or even a couple of inquisitors working together, then it might be easier to explain their presence in an institution that generally tended to avoid stereotypical witchcraft trials. However, these very formulaic trials took place over such a length of time that the inquisitors changed, although there are overlaps, thus these apparent stereotypes cannot be explained in their entirety as due to the imposition of any one individual. According to the case summaries, between 1618 and 1622, six witchcraft trials were conducted by Licenciados Pedro Matheo de Salcedo and Juan de Mañoza, but three similar trials in 1628 were prosecuted by the fiscal Licenciado Domingo Velez de Asis y Argos and adjudicated by the Inquisitor Dr Agustín de Ugarte Sarauia. In 1633–34, eleven trials of the same type were conducted by Velez de Asis y Argos together with the Licenciado Don Manuel de Cortazar y Azarate and in 1641 a further trial was conducted by Cortazar y Azarate, and Dr Velazquez de Contreras. The 1641 trial was the last of its type and stands out among the rest because it was suspended due to the accused (Phelipa) being too scared and too 'bozal' to either understand what she was being accused of or to give any answers (Phelipa AHN, Inq.: 50r–v).

It is true that ecclesiastical prosecutions during the colonial period were necessarily interpreted through a particularly rigid Christian cultural and spiritual framework. As such, anything that fell outside what was permitted was almost invariably demonized. This was the case whether referring to magical practices using prayers to Christian saints (although the distinction was sometimes very difficult to draw between these and ordinary prayers of petition), or whether they were referring to indigenous, or African religious practices. Treatises such as *Disquisitiones magicae* by the Jesuit Martín del Río reinforced this demonological framework.

Yet the demonization of these slave gatherings in such starkly stereotypical terms suggested that something was in fact occurring that the inquisitors simply failed to understand. Even if we can safely discard testimonies of flying to sabbaths and kissing the posteriors of goats as unreliable, we might at least assume that gatherings of some sort were taking place.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, other (fantastic) details such as particular types of shape-changing seem more at

27 In part this assumption can be based on the unlikelihood that an institution as pressed for resources as the Cartagena Inquisition would have based the trials of so many over such a long period of time on pure fantasy. A more reasonable reading would be that slaves were involved in ritual gatherings and these gatherings were misinterpreted during the trial process and strongly overlaid with the European stereotypes. There are also other reasons that we shall investigate below.

home in a context of African magic and folk stories than stereotypical European witches' sabbaths. For example, Jusepa Ruiz (prosecuted in the years 1620–1622) was accused by a witness of having entered her house with the form of a mouse's body and her human head; Maria Cacheo (1628), on the other hand, was accused of transforming herself into the forms of a mouse, a caiman, a duck and a turkey respectively; while Ysabel Hernandez (1628), was testified against for attacking a witness in the form of a bull – when the witness defended himself with a knife the bull allegedly disappeared and Ysabel was left standing there (Ruiz, Cacheo, and Hernandez, AHN Inq.: 227v, 295v, 293r). Even accounts that accuse defendants of flying take on a non-European flavour when they fly onto the rooftops of other slaves' huts and damage the straw whilst crowing like cockerels (Ruiz, AHN Inq.: 227v).<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most telling allegations and confessions are those of ritual homicide. According to the testimonies, the accused entered the houses of their victims and killed them by sucking their blood. If they were children, they would suck the blood through their noses or, if they were adults, through their stomach button. Once dead and buried, they would disinter their victims and carry them to the gathering, where (according to the trial testimonies) they would feast on them after presenting them to the leader of the group (understood by the inquisitors as the devil). Even if for the moment we leave to one side mention of cannibalism, for once again appearing to fit too closely the European stereotype of perceived diabolical perversion, we are still left with the picture of a slave community riven by conflict and death. Many of the victims were apparently baptized children. Leonor of the Çape nation (or Leonor Çape), for example, testified that she was charged by the devil (or leader of the gathering) with doing as much harm to Christians as possible and confessed that she entered the huts of slaves and killed children who had been anointed with holy water by sucking their blood (Çape, AHN Inq.: 213r). María Cacheo, meanwhile, was accused of having killed two of her own children and later testified that she had done this because she was obliged to take bodies as tribute to the head 'demon'. When she had arrived without a body on one occasion she was whipped until bloody by her 'familiar' (Cacheo, AHN Inq.: 296r).

Any attempt to explain these accusations of apparently ritual murders must necessarily be speculative and fraught with difficulties. Del Río's account, for example, talks about witches offering sacrifices and making 'certain promises that every month or fortnight they will kill a small child by witchcraft, i.e. by sucking out its life' (2000: 75).<sup>29</sup> The children's fat, he says, is used in the

28 MacGaffey (1986: 163) notes how particularly crafty witches in the BaKongo would use charms to send animal familiars to damage the crops of their victims rather than take on animal forms themselves (and risk being caught).

29 One cannot help but think here of the similar indigenous Andean homicides mentioned above which appear in Pablo de Arriaga's *Extirpacion de la Idolatria del Piru* published in 1621 and in the letter written in 1617 by the same author (ARSI, Peru, Litt. Ann., 1617: 55r–v). In *Extirpacion de la Idolatria* (1621: 21–23), he adds that the discovery was made in his presence by the extirpator Hernando de Avendaño.

ointment that, with the help of evil spirits, allowed witches to fly (Del Río 2000: 92). In 1628, Anton Caravali was initially prosecuted for *hechicería* having been testified against for superstitious love-magic, providing people with powders, curing enchantments and witch-finding by divination. Through the use of a Jesuit slave who was also a Caravali, he himself confessed to healing many people both black and white who came to him for cures. However, because he seemed 'stubborn' and due to the difficulties of translation, the Jesuit Pedro Claver was brought in as a second interpreter because he, it was believed, had a method to encourage the enslaved defendants to 'tell the truth'. The following testimony, doubly translated, subsequently revealed how thirteen years previously a mulatto woman named Ysabel had apparently taught him to be a witch and to fly by anointing his body with a green ointment, taking him to the gatherings where they engaged in orgiastic rites and feasted on human limbs and blood that had been sucked from victims and brought to the feast in gourds (Caravali, AHN Inq: 297r–298r).

Given the clear similarities between testimony and treatise and the intervention of Jesuit interpreters, it would perhaps be an oversight to disregard the possibility that Del Río's work had influenced the interpretation and development of the defendant's testimonies. Certainly, it is highly likely that the Jesuits like Pedro Claver were familiar with the *Disquisitiones*, just as we know that Del Río read earlier Jesuit letters from the Americas and these, in turn, influenced his own understanding of witchcraft.<sup>30</sup> It is also tempting to explain the testimonies simplistically as evidence of conflict between non-Christian Africans and those who had been converted to Christianity. This would map onto the inquisitorial notion of a diabolical sect moving against the Church of God. Yet even this suggestion does not quite work: the same Anton Caravali, for example, eventually confessed to so many murders (102) that by the end, the inquisitors simply did not believe him, recording that: 'we wanted our commissioners to check if he [really] had killed [...] these people as confessed and in the reports it did not seem that they had been killed, rather that they had been seriously harmed' (Caravali, AHN Inq.: 300v). If the prosecutions had come about due to an ongoing and even developing religious paranoia, then it seems somewhat incongruous to see (finally) such scepticism on the part of the inquisitorial authorities.

At this point it is worthwhile considering a more complex possibility.

Life expectancy among slaves, especially those newly arrived, or the very young, was extremely low and there was a much greater urgency to baptize those in danger of dying. The fact that so many were in such danger was one of the main reasons the Jesuits gave for insisting on baptizing the slaves as soon as they arrived in port (ARSI, Litt. Ann., 1613–16: 103r). Rather than baptism

30 For example, in *Disquisitiones* he describes how indigenous Andeans attempted to cause rain by particular magical rites (Del Río 2000: 84–85) and how Andean religious practitioners near Arequipa were killed during the eruption of a volcano (Omate) in 1600 as they tried to assuage its anger (2000: 169).



being a reason to kill, it is possible that death was understood by the surviving slaves to follow shortly after being anointed. Disinterring the dead and carrying them to these gatherings may have been nothing more than slave communities wishing to bury the dead according to their own traditions. Anne Hilton's history of the Kongo, for example, describes how if after death the ghost of the ancestor returned to harm the living, the Kongo people might assume that the original burial rites were flawed. They would then disinter the corpse, 'resurrect it', ask after the mistake and rebury it using the correct rites. The Kongo priest, the *nganga atombole* received and reanimated the corpse, making it appear to rise, walk about and speak. Hilton further adds that graves were the principal medium through which the living communicated with the dead (1985: 11). In the late sixteenth century, the deads' descendants or near relatives visited the graves every new moon, to lament and feast at the graves, leaving food and drink for the dead to also share. This practice was especially important during times of calamity, multiple deaths and the presumed anger of the ancestors (1985: 12). The trauma of enslavement, the transatlantic journey (with all its associations of crossing the divide into the land of the dead) and the enforced labour in the Americas could hardly not have been considered calamitous. It is even worth speculating that with the proper burial rites for those who died in this, the land of the dead, there may have existed the belief in a possible return to Africa. Wyatt MacGaffey's ethnographic work in Lower Zaire during the 1960s, for example, demonstrated that the majority of those who participated in his research thought that *Mputu* (Europe and America) was, in fact, the land of the dead where souls of deceased Africans assumed white bodies and could return to Africa as Europeans (1986: 62).<sup>31</sup> For those Africans who had not assimilated (or accepted) Christian notions of death and the afterlife and who found themselves or their relatives dying in this land of the dead, African or indeed Afro-American belief systems would have needed to find a way of articulating this apparent paradox.

Evidence that newly Christianized Africans in New Granada were in fact reworking conceptions of death can be found in Alonso de Sandoval's monumental history of the African people, *De instauranda aethiopia salute*. He recounts that baptized Africans would set up altars in what they called a *llanto* or weeping/mourning in order to gather alms to say masses for the soul of the dead person. On the altar they would place a statue of Christ or the Virgin and dance before the image 'with indecency'. They were obliged, he said, to weep tears of blood, and the dances would last into the night when 'who would doubt that indecency becomes grave sin causing offence to the Lord?' (Sandoval 1647: 51–52). He continued, 'this is worse when the people are *ladinos* or Creoles when instead of the

31 It is of course methodologically problematic to work backwards from contemporary ethnographic data, as allowances must be made for the dynamic nature of belief systems over time. Even so, it is still possible to make reasoned (albeit tentative) hypotheses and, where documentary evidence is lacking, is a valid way to try to reconstruct fragmentary glimpses of the past. Such hypotheses may be taken further (or discarded and replaced) by scholars with access to different and more detailed sources.

drums, voices and clapping they use in Guinea, they play infernal little guitars, clack castanets and shake maracas, all of which provoke infernal wickedness'. According to Sandoval, in November 1632, the Bishop of Cartagena, don Fray Luis de Córdoba Ronquillo, issued a proclamation forbidding such gatherings and the setting up of altars to collect alms 'which they say is for masses but in reality is for drunken gatherings and dances' (1647: 52). In fact, the practices described by Sandoval here are not too far removed from a more sensitive reading of the gatherings described in the inquisitorial testimonies. The crucial difference, however, is that these 'witch' gatherings were by Africans in rural situations much less exposed to Christian practices of mourning than those attached to urban confraternities. Ironically, from Sandoval's perspective, these rural African funeral wakes (if that is indeed what they were) were not as bad as those of the *ladinos* with their infernal guitars, castanets and maracas, yet it was these rural Africans who were prosecuted for homicidal witchcraft.

In his brief description of these practices, however, Sandoval makes no mention of food, when one might reasonably expect that these wakes would be accompanied by provision of such for the mourners and indeed for the dead themselves (Hilton 1984: 12). Consideration of food consumption at these gatherings brings us back to the accusations of cannibalism. While in some cases the trial defendants over a period of time did confess to eating the blood and bodies of those they killed,<sup>32</sup> the summary of Leonor Çape's testimony records that the feast (provided by the Devil) consisted simply of 'wine, cakes, couscous, bananas, and everything else that blacks eat' (Çape, AHN Inq.: 214r); Guiomar Bran said they feasted on 'wild pig a la couscous' with chicha (Bran, AHN Inq.: 219r), while Juana de Mora (a free African) in a different series of trials said she ate a bland unseasoned stew (Mora, AHN Inq.: 320v). So these banquets, so sinister in the minds of the inquisitors, might have been nothing more than the food given to those who attended funeral rites.

Once again, however, we can refer back to Del Río, who writes of the witches' sabbath:

They sit down at table and start to enjoy food supplied by the evil spirit or brought by themselves. Sometimes they perform a ritual dance before the feast, sometimes after. Usually, there are various tables – three or four of them – loaded with food which is sometimes very dainty and sometimes quite tasteless and unsalted. (Del Río 2000: 93)

It is therefore impossible to know for certain whether the banquets described in the testimonies are the result of ritual communal gatherings or whether they are the suspicious fantasies of inquisitorial actors informed by writings like that of Martín del Río. Rather than separating them and discarding one in favour of the other, however, it is perhaps reasonable to infer that both these things are happening; that there was an African ritual gathering involving feasting and dancing taking place and that descriptions of these real gatherings were being

32 See, for example, the trials of Polonia Negra (AHN Inq.: 221r–224v), Ysabel Hernandez (AHN Inq.: 293r–295r), and María Cacheo (AHN Inq.: 295r–297r).

overlaid with a European demonological framework. This possibility holds even when we consider a suggestion of the existence of unrelenting conflict between groups of slaves due to the confessions of homicide and cannibalism. In the trial of the above-mentioned Leonor Çape, a co-defendant testified through an interpreter that Leonor had killed a fellow slave woman, Ysabel of the Biafras. When asked why by the ‘demon’ of the gathering she told him because Ysabel often whipped her. What is particularly interesting is the so-called demon’s response. According to her testimony he seemed surprised and displeased, replying, ‘and you killed her for nothing more? Be silent! You will pay me the price for that’ (Çape, AHN Inq.: 210v–211r).

This, in fact, appears in direct contrast to Del Río’s treatise, which states:

Each person gives an account of the wicked deeds he has done since the last meeting. The more serious these are and the more detestable, the more they are praised [...]. But if they have done nothing, or if their deeds are not dreadful enough, the sluggish witches are given an appalling beating by the evil spirit or by some senior worker of harmful magic. (Del Río 2000: 94)

Rather than punishing Leonor for her lack of wickedness (as Del Río would have it) the ‘demonic’ leader was apparently enraged at her excessive aggression and vengeance. From the testimony’s wording it appears that even if the so-called demon accepted that violence between slaves did happen, he certainly did not want to encourage it. So what might we infer was occurring?

As part of the same testimony, the witness confessed that together with Leonor and another companion they had drowned a slave captain who used to whip them (Çape, AHN Inq.: 211r). And the testimony of witnesses against Çape’s accomplice, Guiomar of the Bran nation, was even more enlightening. They told the inquisitors that she had done a great deal of harm on the ranch of her master Francisco de Santiago and that she had killed many slaves of the Biafra caste ‘because she had always got on badly with the blacks of that caste’ (Bran, AHN Inq.: 216r).

In the testimonies relating to both Leonor’s and Guiomar’s trials we can see two quite different tensions, one which hints at the development of a pan-West African socio-political and religious framework alongside the persistence of continued inter-ethnic conflicts transferred from West Africa to the Americas and exacerbated by hierarchical structures of enslavement enforced through violence. While an emergent leadership opposed to Spanish dominion over Africans appeared to be working towards a unified cultural resistance (and in a number of significant cases this resistance became political and military), older inter-ethnic conflicts at the root of the slave trade continued to be played out in the Americas. Not surprisingly the violence of overseers, themselves slaves but ones who had been co-opted by the system to which they were enslaved, also provoked violent (and sometimes fatal) responses. By itself, the former hypothesis is tentative until placed alongside scholarship that discusses the *palenques*, communities of escaped slaves – crucially of various West African ethnic groups together – who lived outside the Viceregal system. Throughout the seventeenth

century these communities fought what might be considered a guerrilla war against Spanish slave owners and colonial authorities, raiding isolated haciendas (for supplies, to increase their numbers, and to simply damage the Spanish) and defending themselves when they came under attack. From the very beginnings of the slave trade to New Granada in the latter half of the sixteenth century, these multinational African communities in the hinterland of Cartagena and Santiago de Tolú were perceived to be a very real threat to Spanish authority and there were numerous attempts to destroy these communities (some successful, some not) (Vidal Ortega 2002: 219–34, 223). In the first decade of the seventeenth century, such was the power of one African leader, Domingo Biohó, that two successive Spanish governors, Gerónimo de Zuazo and Fernández de Velasco, felt obliged to enter into negotiations in order to bring a successful resolution to the violence. Biohó was able to resist until 1621 when he was finally captured during a raid, tried, then executed (Vidal Ortega 2002: 229–31).

The ritual element of these resistive *palenque* communities can be seen in the conflict that occurred in the years 1633–1634 between the Spanish from Cartagena and the Palenque de Limón, which had existed since at least the 1580s (see McKnight 2004). Captured enemies of the community were sacrificed during the initiation of Leonor, the *palenque's* Queen, in what Kathryn Joy McKnight describes as 'blood-rituals in a context of spiritually infused warfare'. The *palenque* leaders, she argues, saw themselves as 'waging a justified war against a traitorous enemy', an enemy that engaged in long-term negotiations while at the same time moving militarily against them (McKnight 2004: para. 23). McKnight compares the ritual killings that took place to those of the seventeenth-century *Imbangala* bands of the Mbundu region of Central West Africa and draws particular attention to the legend of Temba Andumba, a female leader who ritually sacrificed her own children 'providing the symbolic foundation for the human sacrifices with which the Imbangala made themselves invulnerable in war' (McKnight 2004: para. 39). In the torture and killing of an overseer, however, the rites that took place in the Palenque de Limón were adapted to a new American reality, in which the sacrifices simultaneously constructed a new inter-ethnic identity bound under the absolute authority of a powerful queen, while violently rejecting the illegitimate authority of slaves who oppressed other slaves within the Spanish system (McKnight 2004: paras 40–41). The same could be said of the apparent ritual homicides confessed to by the slaves prosecuted for witchcraft during this same period.

As can be seen by the complex layers within the witch-trial testimonies, however, leaders of these clandestine ritual gatherings could not, it appears, always instil a sense of African identity over and above the ethnic hatreds that still persisted in slave society. As mentioned above, Leonor Çape was denounced for having killed a Biafra woman, incurring the wrath of the ritual's leader (or demon), while Guiomar of the Bran confessed to killing many Biafras due to the bad blood between them. It is important to consider that if it is plausible to believe that these killings did in fact occur, it is also plausible to consider that they did



**Figure 1** Cowrie shell and antelope horn headdress, Kon Kombo, West Africa. Photograph courtesy of National Museums Liverpool.

so in a ritual context and a context that was intimately linked to West African witchcraft rather than its European inquisitorial parody. In his essay 'Cannibals, Witches and Slave Traders', John Thornton discusses the importance of placing the slave trade within the context of ongoing warfare between West African kingdoms; it was a 'manifestation of local politics – the solution to problems raised by war' (Thornton 2003: 277). Crucially, he argues, 'Africans were unlikely to make the European and American traders responsible for the events that led to their enslavement, but instead shifted the blame to many others, including a good many other Africans' (2003: 277). Discourses of cannibalism, whereby groups were enslaved by other Africans, transferred to the power of the whites – spirits returned from the dead – and shipped across the ocean to the land of the dead were already circulating amongst Africans, with little assistance from European discourses. From the perspective of the enslaved, those responsible for such calamitous events must be those who could converse with the dead – the witches who may or may not have been allied to enemy ethnic groups. In cases where the responsibility of other ethnic groups was not in question, the way to continue to fight back, or to take revenge, was to harness that very same power, especially once arrived in *Mputu*, the land of the dead. It was legitimate, then, to use magical rites to kill overseers and members of enemy kinship groups related to the witches that had them enslaved in the first place.

At the same time, it is also important to consider the power believed to be inherent in the magical homicide and this might go some way to explaining the seemingly indiscriminate nature of some of the New Granada homicides – not all could be explained by inter-ethnic or hierarchical tension, especially in the cases of infanticide (if, indeed, they really happened and if these deaths were not merely natural). In certain regions of the BaKongo, killing was considered to be a condition of successful candidacy to rule, wherein the aspirant to the throne or chieftainship was required to murder at least one clan member in order to prove his authority. In order to have the title bestowed on him (or her) the aspirant had to hand over slaves and souls (night people) to the investing chiefs of similar rank. Chosen victims would sicken and die and their souls would become bounty for the investiture (MacGaffey 1986: 68–69). Significantly high priests underwent similar initiations to chiefs and paid fees in the form of visible slaves and 'nocturnal victims'. They were also expected to initiate lesser priests (MacGaffey 1986: 139).

Killing a person through witchcraft in the Central West African context was believed to be done by sucking the soul from its ordinary container (the body) and placing it in another container, a gourd or an animal. By consuming souls and charms made by eating the flesh of children witches were believed to achieve the power to strike down people outside their own kinship groups once a certain threshold of death had been reached (MacGaffey 1986: 163–64). If we consider that within the West African context, witches were believed responsible for the consumption of Africans through their transportation to the land of the dead on the slave ships, and that witches had real power in this land due to their ability



**Figure 2** Ram mask, Mossi, Burkina Faso.  
Photograph courtesy of National Museums Liverpool.

to commune with the dead, then it is possible to reread the Cartagena witchcraft trials still within a context of witchcraft, but one that was an entirely West African reality rather than a European fantasy. Such readings can shed new light on testimonies such as that of María Linda, also known as María Mandinga from the rivers of Guinea. In her testimony, two black slaves invited her to the gatherings when she was just a girl, initiated her, and only afterwards did she begin to kill, 'suffocating a little black boy' (Linda, AHN Inq.: 226v). Such testimonies might easily be dismissed as too closely fitting the European demonological framework wherein a satanic church is propagated by willing participants in ritual homicide, yet they might also be read from within a context of West African witchcraft transferred to the Americas. Even the European stereotype par excellence of Satan (or the head demon) appearing in the form of a goat or a horned man might be seen from a West African perspective if we take a second look at the sources.

In both Guiomar Bran's and Leonor Çape's testimony, the leader of the rites was said to be a devil in the hybrid form of a he-goat and a black man, naked except for a loincloth and a kerchief that covered his face and partially covered his horns (Çape, Bran, AHN Inq.: 212r, 221r). Once again this seems like clear inquisitorial fantasy imposed on the testimonies of the defendants, yet the testimony can still be reread from within a West African ritual context. The use of horned headdresses and animistic spirit masks was an important part of West African ritual dances and ceremonies. Compare, for example, the above description with the cowrie shell and antelope horn headdress from Kon Kombo in West Africa [below](#) (Fig. 1). The wearer's face would be covered and by wearing it he would become a horned medium between the spirit world and the human.

Descriptions of demons and witches appearing in the form of goats and cats in these trial testimonies can be similarly compared to other spirit masks of West Africa such as the carved ram's head mask from Burkina Faso, also [below](#) (Fig. 2).

What appears to be emerging from this rereading of the trial testimonies is that alongside the inquisitorial fantastical framework of stereotypical European witchcraft, in colonial New Granada there may well have existed an entirely parallel African system of witchcraft. This parallel system both allowed for the perpetuation of inter-ethnic conflict through homicidal religious rites that gave the perpetrators substantial magical and social power whilst it also created a new African-American identity.

### Conclusion

As this essay has tried to demonstrate, scholars are confronted with a number of methodological problems when they come to examine inquisitorial witch trials such as those that took place in Cartagena during the first half of the seventeenth century, especially when the documentation itself is incomplete and summarized. The first is whether to look beyond the imposition of fantas-



tical European stereotypes by inquisitors familiar with standard demonological tropes. If the answer is yes, and White's article linking the trials to those in Logroño shows that it does not have to be, then the next difficulty is to decide where and how to look. There is of course the inherent problem of reading too much complexity and meaning into historical documents, but this essay has aimed to show that there is more to these witch trials than dark demonological fantasy.

The first place to look beyond the European formulas is in the role of the Jesuits and their own slaves as mediators and interpreters of testimony, in particular given the similarities between the contemporary Jesuit Martín del Río's seminal demonological text and the recorded testimony in the archives of the Inquisition, and especially when we consider that these testimonies were translated under the influence of Pedro Claver (among others). The argument has necessarily been speculative and there remains much research still to be done on the specific roles and impact of these Jesuit interpreters. The resulting testimonies arguably were inquisitorial fantasies and they were imposed on the prosecuted slaves, yet the mediation of interpreters was of prime importance. Given the presence of the Jesuits in slave society, or rather, at the slaves' entry and exit points to Hispanic society, and given the Society's influence on understanding of witchcraft (due to the circulation of letters from around the world and treatises such as that of Martín del Río), it would appear that the global nature of the Jesuit missionary enterprise had a subsequent globalizing effect on perceptions of local religions and customs, including those of the African slaves in New Granada, and, by extension, perceptions of occult witchcraft.

At the same time, the witch trials can and perhaps should be read from a more African perspective. When this is done, a very different picture can emerge, one that still shows the slaves to be involved in witchcraft practices, but practices that were entirely West African in origin and entirely subsumed within the varied but merging belief systems of these West Africans in New Granada. Theirs was a belief system that placed New Granada in the land of the dead on the other side of the great ocean. If witches were powerful individuals who consorted with the dead and consumed the living, the practice of magic – especially the potent magic that involved ritual killing and cannibalism – paradoxically would have been an important method of survival in this mirror world to the land of the living.

It becomes easy to see how once translated twice by a slave and then a Jesuit priest, these practices as described by defendants in the trials could have been transmuted into a description of stereotypical European witches' sabbaths, satanism and diabolical homicide. Of course, given the inherent problems of projecting ethnographic scholarship backwards in time it is an open question how much of our present-day understanding of so-called West African witchcraft has been affected by European demonological stereotypes. This is true even combining these ethnographic projections with analyses of letters and chronicles written by seventeenth-century missionaries to the West African kingdoms.

As with the Jesuit interpreters, there is much research that might still be done in this area as scholars continue to piece together fragmentary histories and make connections on both sides of the Atlantic.

Despite the obscuring role of European witchcraft stereotypes, the Cartagena trial testimonies still hint at a slave society that could and did come together in a ritual communion aimed at investing individuals and groups with power in a society where Africans were deliberately denied it. They also suggest that despite the intentions of African leaders, this society was far from united; rather, it was one where social conflict was endemic due to the violently hierarchical structure of slavery and where ethnic conflicts between African nations had been brought with the slaves across the Atlantic. These testimonies in fact suggest that the trials had uncovered an ongoing conflict played out in ritual practice that the inquisitors – European outsiders – simply failed to understand.

Perhaps the leaders of these ritual gatherings (so often called Lucifer or ‘the head demon’ in the trials) were keen for differences to be put aside and for slaves to stop harming each other, as the testimony in Leonor Çape’s trial would seem to suggest – conceivably in order to generate strength from unity. This would certainly fit in the context of the ongoing conflict between Spanish and *palenque* communities of escaped slaves. But rather than slaves against their masters, as the Spanish so often seemed to fear, this West African witchcraft in New Granada also appears to have given individuals or small groups the opportunity to settle differences as they fought for survival in this land of the dead, where, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, life really was ‘nasty, brutish and short’ (Hobbes 2009: 70).

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 Exp. (Expediente)  
 Inq. (Sección Inquisición)  
 Leg. (Legajo)  
 Lib. (Libro)  
 fol. (Folio)  
 NR&Q (Provincia Novi Regnum et Quitensis)  
 ONN (Opera Nostri)  
 Peru (Provincia Peruana)

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