

Transatlantic Afro Medicinal Power in the Inquisition of Cartagena de Indias and the Supreme
Court of Madrid:

Intersectionality, Hybridity and Transculturation

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McKnight notes that in 1630, about 1,800 to 2,000 Europeans lived in the city of Cartagena de Indias, one of the main points of entry of African slaves to the Americas in the 17th century and the seat of one of the Spanish Crown's Inquisitions in the Americas. Among the Europeans, 90% were Spanish and about 10% were Portuguese. Most of the Portuguese were slave traders and suspected of practicing Judaism (McKnight, "En su Tierra" 66), a religion persecuted by the Catholic Holy Inquisition. As for the indigenous people, it was reported that in the early 1600s, there were about 3,191 in the district of Cartagena. While the number of Afro people a

definition of Afro-descendant in this essay will be that of those who reflect the African heritage modified by their experiences in the Americas (Cobb 147).

Thus, among those accused of sorcery between 1610 and 1650, 19 were Afro-descendants, 11 “mulattoes”,

According to Palma, witchcraft has three central aspects. The first consists in the meaning that this female practice seeks to reverse women's subordination to men. The second aspect references the fact that sorcery powers were believed to be inherent to women's nature. Women could awaken them at any time for subversive purposes. Finally, the third aspect highlights the mediating role of the Church inside sexual matters (56).

Other authors differentiate witchcraft from sorcery in the seventeenth century, in terms of behaviors or beliefs. The inquisitors describe sorcery as superstitious prayers used for magical purposes, unorthodox healing practices in which the devil could be invoked. Witchcraft, meanwhile, pertained to groups that made pacts with the devil. These pacts were made during nocturnal ceremonies that included dancing around a goat, sexual activities, and renouncing Jesus, Mary, and the saints (Silva 199).

Both the Spanish or Portuguese healers' doctors, called sometimes witches, especially in the case of women, the Afros of Angola, Guinea, and those of West and Central-West Africa (under a hybridization Canclini's third space) would use mixed remedies and plants as in the famous Paula de Eguiluz's case. She had a very active role in creating a spiritual and physical environment to promulgate her healing techniques. She worked even in the hospitals of the city and pharmacies. Her work was sometimes part of the

and racial groups. In her testimonies trying to save herself from the Inquisition, Paula combined her own beliefs with the Christian religion, “the declarations of Paula contained these two variants, represented in the figures of the devil and the virgin of the rosary” (Maya). However, a great aggravation was when Eguiluz’s declarations in front of the holy tribunal, turned into heresies in acts contrary to the Catholic dogma, when she made, for example, in the last trial, invocations to the devil to predict the future (Maya).

In contrast, in Spain, the Suprema had become skeptical of denunciations of witchcraft, instructing its districts to investigate more and seek rational explanations. Then, what I want to call attention to, as McKnight indicated, is that “The split between Cartagena and Madrid was ultimately what saved Paula’s life” (“Performing” 1). Since, as it was explained at the beginning of this text, the Suprema saved Eguiluz's life. She was not sentenced to death. But this case also proves how the Inquisition itself would lead its defendants to say what they wanted to hear, to continue to control the fear of the Christian devil, combined with African acts or convictions, which were used even by the priests themselves:

...the world of magic even entered the Church, with many clergies incorporating folk practices-rites, prayers, offerings, dances into the normal liturgy. All this, as we shall see, was stamped on firmly by reforming bishops, post-Tridentine clergy and the Inquisition. In the process of contrasting the dark world of primitive superstition with the illuminated world of the gospel, unfortunately, preachers and learned men unduly simplified the forces at work and helped to create fears of “witchcraft.” (Kamen 292)

Moreover, Afro practitioners in colonial times, with many emotional, mental, and physical health needs, contributed by testing the elements they found in the new world, and began to study the native plants around them. These empirical methods used by Eguiluz, and other *curanderos* in

the 17th century, are today's scientific methods, as Gómez indicates, since the body is united with the soul and their environment, "to test medicinal substances were based on epistemological systems that involved an understanding of human physicality as intrinsically connected to moral, spiritual and socio-political events" ("The Circulation" 400).

It was, in short, the union of health's mind and body, so widespread even in the present twenty-first century. In summary, beliefs in these early diasporas were heavily influenced, not only by these traveling ritual specialists, but also by a population that was mobile and exposed to influences from all over the world. But in the American colonies, the "Spanish Caribbean communities had become increasingly 'Africanized' throughout the seventeenth century; the social milieu of Cartagena, Havana and San Juan had much more in common with Benguela, Salvador da Bahia, Cacheu and São Jorge da Mina than with Santa Fé de Bogotá, Lima or Mexico City" (Gómez, "The Circulation" 402).

This happened because the regional populations ended up mixing to survive. During these centuries, there were difficulties in scientific and medicinal advancements. Eguiluz and the practitioners of Afro rituals were condemned to work in the hospitals of the port city, as well as being in charge of preparing medicines in the pharmacies of the Caribbean (Gómez, "The Circulation" 399). Many also worked in health centers from a young age, finding an opportunity for subsistence, and even later freedom from slavery. These were centuries of many challenges, both for Afro people, indigenous people, women, and even in the case of powerful men or religious leaders.

Hence, as clarified above, one of the medicinal treatments of the Afros included the soul, not only that of the sick, but also the one of the healers, since both must feel well and in good condition. This is yet another example of the hybridization of all these cultures in the colonial era

cultures ("En su Tierra" 74). That is to say, the Inquisition itself, by forcing its accused to admit their guilt and by promoting changes in testimony, helped to perpetuate the beliefs or acts it claimed to combat.

used in another very important seaport in Spain, that of the Canary Islands, and were recorded in a book of magic of the sixteenth century, attributed to King Solomon (Maya 1). Thus, it was a multi-ethnic community in the slave port of Cartagena de Indias, which included even the

among European, Creole, African, African American, and indigenous women; therefore, women of African descent such as Paula had a great reputation (Maya). In the 17th century, Africans were respected for their medical knowledge, as Gomez points out, in the face of the shortcomings of science, unlike later centuries ("The Circulation" 402). Thus, in the Spanish Caribbean of this century, culture was not framed by the ideas of the Enlightenment, which were later, but rather by biological, political, or economic survival imperatives, among all the actors of different origins, in an era of transformations (Gómez, "The Circulation" 401).

Economic aspects, which also influenced the decisions of the Holy Inquisition of Cartagena de Indias, as Silva points out, described the denunciations made by Paula de Eguluz in her trials. These aroused the interest of a group of Afro-descendant women who owned houses in a neighborhood near the center of the city in the seventeenth century, Los Jagüeyes (today, the San Diego neighborhood in Cartagena). The *curanderos* used the water wells of this

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disrupted a tight-knit community of free people of African descent living in an increasingly desirable area of the city” (Silva 198).

to promote orthodoxy” (207). Quoting Pablo Gómez, the author goes on to indicate, as her studies have proven and contrary to what some historians claim, Europeans did not use different or dangerous rites but practiced similar aspects:

Gómez shows otherwise. West African Bissau and Bran healers sacrificed oxen for protection against disease; French peasants applied the skin of newly killed sheep to sick bodies to cure them. In 1627, the archbishop of the New Kingdom of Granada was not healed by his physicians, and turned to *Mohanes* who wrapped his arm in the body of a freshly killed bull. The archbishop and the healers might have told different narratives about the metaphysics of this practice, but they shared a belief in the power of the bull's body to heal the man's arm. And if the cure worked, so might the narratives converge, even temporarily. (208)

Given this reality, Gómez's research work ("Bodies of Encounter" 2) shows that most of the Spanish Caribbean population in the seventeenth century valued African rituals and healing practices in terms equivalent to European health traditions:

Early modern inhabitants of Spanish locales in the Caribbean did not treat African ideas and beliefs about the body, health, and death as retrograde or "uncivilized" superstitions. This view would become normative in eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century Western narratives. (Gomez, "Bodies of Encounter" 290).

Gomez finds that “the scientific revolution took place on the margins of the seventeenth-century Atlantic world, in the hands and minds of people of African descent” (Graubart 209). For Gomez, early modern African and European traditions share an ontological conception of health

surroundings in the world ("Bodies of Encounter" 5). It was not the idea to impose Western or Central West African cultural traditions, or to make resistance against European social and cultural normative structures since, "Black ritual practitioners and communities in the Caribbean were more interested in producing competitive healing techniques, explanations and rituals" (Gómez

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