


Introduction

ADRIANA RUÍZ DE CABRERA AND THE MEXICAN INQUISITION IN 1655

 In 1655, at the midpoint of New Spain's three-hundred year colonial period, a woman named Adriana Ruíz de Cabrera was accused of witchcraft (*hechicería*) in the eastern port city of Vera Cruz.¹ She was carted off to Mexico City, the colony's capital, where she was condemned to a dungeon run by the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The records of her trial identify her as belonging to the black *casta* (caste), but while the majority of blacks in colonial Mexico were likely enslaved during this era, Adriana, as it happens, was not.²

The trial opened with the inquisitors' accusation that Adriana had used herbs, "superstitions," and "tricks" to uncover thefts and "take revenge" on people. The immediate complaint indicated that she had offered her services as a witch to ascertain who had robbed a boarder in the rooming house she owned. To do this, she had allegedly gathered together for a washtub-water divination a group of women who "know about and use the things" of witchcraft. In conformance to the caste classifications conventional in the colony, one of these women was identified as Spanish, one as mulatto, one as Indian, and one, like Adriana, as black.

Adriana claimed to be a confirmed and baptized Christian who knew "nothing of witchcraft." The washtub, she said, held only herbs to make a scented mixture for the religious sisterhood of which she was an elder. Moreover, she had grown up in the "unblemished" house of a Spanish lieutenant and his wife. Had she been raised by a "suspicious" woman, she added, she would more likely have blasphemed. While she might have

succumbed in her youth to “women’s weaknesses” (*flaquerías de mujer*), including sexual promiscuity in the form of incest with her brother, she had only once been called a witch, and that was in jest. From her point of view, the charges were therefore “tricks, lies, and false testimonies.”

It was customary for the inquisitors to keep denunciant secret, which they did in this instance as well. But Adriana knew that her accuser was Ana María de la Concepción, another free black woman who had asked to rent a room at Adriana’s boardinghouse and had then stolen items from one of Adriana’s three black slaves. The plaintiff could not “be any other person than the black Ana María,” Adriana insisted, for the woman was a “lying cheat” whose “evil” (*maldad*) had to be stopped. All of Ana María’s accusations were lies, she added, “because [Ana María] is a black [woman] [*negra*].”

Tales like Adriana’s illustrate the role caste played as a system of values, practices, and meanings in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico: the dispute ostensibly dealt with whether or not Adriana was a witch, but the textual narrative highlights how she, her defenders, and her accusers constructed their arguments in great part through claims about caste. In this vein, Adriana went on to defend herself with the help of two Spanish priests, who insisted that she had overcome her “natural” inclinations. She was once “rebellious and too much given to sensuality,” said one, but had since come to control these “excesses”—she was respected, owned slaves, and had a well-appointed home. The other remarked that she behaved quietly and peacefully, prospered, and gave alms to the poor and to clergymen. Both told the inquisitors that Adriana regularly heard mass, confessed, took communion, and made sure that her family and slaves arrived punctually to church. Adriana’s attorney then contrasted her with the “lying” Ana María: Adriana was “a *clean-living* black woman,” he said.³ She was devoted to the Virgin Mary and had dealings with the principal Spanish men and women of Vera Cruz. She was not idle, he insisted, and she gained a livelihood through her own hard work.

In support of Adriana, the attorney also discredited Ana María for what he claimed to be her instability as a woman and her baseness as a black. By law, he pointed out, “women are kept from testifying in criminal cases due to the fragility of their sex and their fickleness . . . They bring false testimony, and even civil law excludes them if, along with being women, they have an evil reputation.” Ana María’s “other vices,” including the “vileness of her caste,” also barred her from testifying. Adriana, he argued, was *not* a “similar case.”

Ana María was not a native of New Spain, and a notary duly described her as a “foreign black.” Born in Guatemala, she had apparently been stolen as a young girl and taken to Spain, where she was raised as a slave. She was eventually brought to Cartagena by the count who owned her. When he died, she fled with a slave girl she herself had abducted and kept by her side through various forms of subterfuge. After turning Ana María over to the authorities for stealing from one of her slaves, Adriana searched Ana María’s clothing. There she found tucked into a pocket, a falsified deed of slavery for the girl. Because Adriana could not read, she gave the deed to a court clerk, who declared that Ana María should be “broken and burned.”

For her part, Ana María testified that everyone was against her, for “people” said of her: *del monte sale que en el monte quema* (one who comes out of the backwoods burns in the backwoods). In the colonial imagination, the hills or backwoods (*monte*) marked the undomesticated spaces beyond civilized towns and cities. The backwoods were associated especially with runaway slaves and Indians who, having fled Spanish rule, were seen to have reverted to their former ways. By invoking this idiomatic phrase, Ana María must have been relating what others perceived to be her intractable wildness.

In her testimony, Ana María also insisted that Adriana and the Indian who had participated in the alleged washtub ritual were longstanding friends. This claim was loaded with a meaning that Ana María further pressed as she added that Adriana had once asked the Indian woman to divine for her and, in fact, had invited her to lead the divination in the washtub ritual, a request with which the Indian had complied. When all was said and done, then, Ana María might have been “of the monte,” but Adriana was worse, for she had allegedly engaged an Indian witch right in the heart of town.

During her months-long trial, Adriana repeatedly claimed that she was innocent of the charges. In the end, she was indeed vindicated when Ana María finally conceded that she had lied. She never imagined that the Inquisition would act on her contentions, Ana María said, nor could she be held entirely responsible for her actions because the “devil had tricked her.” She was fined a considerable sum, and Adriana was set free.

Court records such as the one that preserved moments of Adriana’s life are the best sources available for gaining access to colonial people’s quotidian experiences, for in them individuals testified about, cen-

sured, and defended their own and others' perspectives and day-to-day activities.⁴ Although the records are ones of conflict, they more broadly tell us about the meanings and usages of caste in New Spain. As Adriana's dispute indicates, individuals drew on caste symbolism and caste practices to delineate social boundaries, values, and their own positions. Adriana thus verbally distanced herself from the "evils" of blackness, pointed out that she owned slaves, and tied her heritage to estimable Spaniards, while Ana María elaborated Adriana's bonds to an Indian "friend." Both of these women knew, as did the inquisitors who oversaw the proceedings, that proximity to Spanishness and Spaniards indicated conformity to proper colonial values. Conversely, proximity to Indians and Indianness marked a potent and nonconforming supernaturalism. It is more than suggestive that the discourse of the text draws connections between the black woman Adriana and both Spaniards and Indians, for colonial caste logic provided for a range of interstitial actors who took on qualities of power represented by Indians and qualities represented by Spaniards. In the end, the ambiguous question of Adriana's witchery turned on the ambiguities of caste itself. Was Adriana Spanish (and not a witch) in spite of her blackness? Was she really Indian (and definitely a witch) in spite of her Spanishness? Was she legally black according to the genealogies that the Inquisition typically policed? Or did her identity more complexly play off of the social and symbolic implications of her caste affiliations and practices?

The colonial politics of caste reflected a social world in which the divide between rulers and ruled was constantly criss-crossed and mediated by a multiplicity of subjects. In light of this, this book uses records that address inter-caste experiences and relationships involving people legally classified as "Spaniards" (*españoles*), as well as those classified as "Indians" (*indios*), "blacks" (*negros*), "mulattoes" (*mulatos*) (the offspring of a black and an Indian or a black and a Spaniard), and "mestizos" (*mestizos*) (the offspring of a Spaniard and an Indian).⁵ Those records indicate that caste spoke to the distinct but interlocking kinds of power that each of these categories represented, while indexing a clever and multilayered process that pulled individuals into a colonial world while effectively allowing them to strategize within it.⁶

Colonial Mexicanists who write in English tend to translate *casta* as "race" and to base their analyses of the caste system (*sistema de castas*) prevalent in the colony on caste as a stratified set of sociolegal rankings. Yet while race was produced through taxonomies developed to exclude from power individuals western science construed as essentially dif-

ferent due to blood, ancestry, or color, caste constituted a more ambiguous and flexible set of qualities that combined social affiliations, kinship, and inherent differences as it worked to facilitate incorporation into systems of power.⁷ Ultimately, caste was something of a capacity, elaborated through the genealogical, moral, and operational aspects of a person's place in relation to other persons. Such capacity was animated and transmitted through "dense webs" of social networks like those Michel Foucault identifies as key to the "thematics of power."⁸ As he argues, such thematics do not rest on a "certain strength," an "elementary force," or an "essence." They are rather about the strategies deployed by persons who act on others, who in turn are potential actors in their own right.⁹

THE SANCTIONED AND UNSANCTIONED DOMAINS

Especially because of its large populations of blacks and Indians, colonial Mexico raises interesting questions about the history of racial thinking and the enactment of power. In the documentation, one finds nothing so simple as a shared camaraderie or a mutual resentment between these two subordinated groups—the one initially imported as slave labor and the other enduring as conquered indigenes. Rather, every manuscript page reveals a complicated social sparring indicating that connections between blacks and Indians, and broader questions of domination and resistance, have to be contextualized in a world wider than one might initially suppose.¹⁰ Indeed, analysis of what turns out to be a complex colonial politics of caste must include those classified as Spaniards, as well as the mulattoes and mestizos whose numbers grew rapidly after the initial conquest period.

As discussed here, the politics of caste involved two trajectories of power, which mirrored each other and were inextricably intertwined. The dispute around Adriana indicates that patterns of kinship (including figurative), friendship, and patronage tying people to Spaniards were meaningful, and so were ones tying people to Indians. The first set of patterns indexes colonizing processes that politically organized caste to privilege Spaniards and Spanishness while subordinating Indians and Indianness, and turning blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos into mediators who extended Spanish authority. In this book I call the social fields that constituted this domain *sanctioned* in order to convey a sense of routine caste behaviors and meanings that were implicitly—if not

always legally—condoned by the colonial state and its agents. The second set of patterns indexes the world of witchcraft, a term which described state-censured sets of moral violations ranging from unorthodox religious behavior, including trysts and pacts with the devil, to popular forms of sorcery or “black magic.” The social fields of this domain—which I call *unsanctioned*—reversed sanctioned patterns by organizing caste in ways that privileged Indians and Indianness, while subordinating Spaniards and Spanishness and reorienting blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos, who could now attach themselves to Indians in a bid to undermine Spaniards. Put simply, these domains were something of Spanish and Indian worlds bracketed by Spaniards and Indians, and integrated and brought together by the mediating groups. If the health of the sanctioned social body depended on the “vigor and proper functioning”¹¹ of its interrelated caste parts, so too, in the end, did its unsanctioned illness.

While the sanctioned and the unsanctioned referenced two possible trajectories of power, the unsanctioned also followed inevitably from the sanctioned ways in which the colonial state organized and gave meaning to caste. In particular, both trajectories spoke to a logic that converged around the Spanish attribution of weakness to Indians.¹² A feminized quality, weakness justified and made possible Indian subservience to Spanish governance in the sanctioned domain. But weakness also produced that domain’s reversal, for in the unsanctioned domain the devil made victims of Indians, who came to wield authority over Spaniards through witchcraft. Colonial ideologies generated both domains, and colonial institutional and social policies drew into their spheres of influence a cross section of individuals from a range of caste categories.

In her study of contemporary Gawan (Papua New Guinea) society, Nancy Munn draws on the concept of hegemony and Foucauldian understandings of power as “the pressures embedded in social interaction”¹³ to semantically situate Gawan witchcraft within the wider social field of Gawan conceptions of self and society, emphasizing negation in the form of witchcraft as an integral part of the social collective. Examining how the “world” of the witch and the “world” of the non-witch belong to the same cultural system, Munn concludes that neither world can be said to be prior;¹⁴ instead, the witch personifies the “negative principles” that hold sway over everyday Gawan life.¹⁵ Drawing on Munn’s ideas, we can look at the colonial Mexican unsanctioned domain as, on the one hand, what Munn refers to as a “‘world’ of its own”

with reference to Gawan witchcraft.¹⁶ On the other hand, it was made operational in the context of a cultural system that included the sanctioned domain, which set the terms of the debate over values and with which the unsanctioned cohered through the idiom and implications of caste. In both domains, power filtered through the social affiliations people forged as the different castes were drawn into a unified system of meanings that shifted with the frame of reference: the same caste qualities made individuals less esteemed in one domain and more esteemed in the other. What remained consistent was the idea that prestige operated through the shaded distinctions to which caste spoke. Thus, while the sanctioned and the unsanctioned were in opposition, that opposition was itself constituted through the singular logic of a caste framework that delimited patterns of power, including the contrariness of witchcraft. Both the sanctioned and the unsanctioned produced spaces for elite *and* subaltern activity and passivity, and both provided viable paths to authority and its loss.

Raymond Williams's observation that "the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture"¹⁷ therefore bears keeping in mind. Colonial Mexican witchcraft, though at first glance seemingly counterhegemonic, derived from the hegemonic, which referred back to its own opposition in an endless loop. Witchcraft was not, then, an autonomous realm of resistance. It was instead a set of discourses and practices derived from the colonial implications of caste. The conflicts it embodied spoke to the struggles characteristic of hegemony, which William Roseberry describes as a "common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination."¹⁸ That common material and meaningful framework generated in the present case by caste principles reveal fissures that both destabilized, through witchcraft, and reinforced, through not-witchcraft, the hold of colonialism on the populace.¹⁹

In his study of "wildness" and witchcraft in colonial and contemporary Colombia and Peru, Michael Taussig brings the above issues to bear on the Latin American case through an artful analysis of Indian *magia* (magic) as a hegemonic social force linked to Western ideas about race and the ongoing political economy of conquest.²⁰ As he explores the interpenetrating worlds of colonizers and colonized, Taussig calls social analysts to task for imposing order on the inherent disorder of social life.²¹ In this book, I seek to explain aspects of that disorder by showing how Spanishness, Indianness, and other caste qualities constituted a deep

logic in the colonial imagination and, consequently, in the lives and experiences of colonial peoples. In piecing together that logic, I turn to gender themes and, to a lesser extent, class themes in order to show how caste was organized by sets of meanings that seeped into these other configurations.²² For instance, we have seen that the Indian witch brought to the fore in Adriana's case was a woman, as were the litigants themselves. Ana María described the Indian as the leader of a group of women gathered together for allegedly nefarious purposes, and certainly the problem that was femaleness otherwise runs through the narrative.²³ References to class do as well. Thus, for instance, Adriana's propertied status served to reinforce her honor by countering the fickleness assigned to Ana María, a thief and a vagabond.

In addition to extending the implications of power in the above ways, I maintain a focus on the forms of mediation and interstitiality represented by non-Indian, non-Spanish actors like Ana María and Adriana. This is because actors and qualities defined by blackness, mulatto-ness, and mestiz-ness straddled Spanish and Indian power and the Indian and Spanish worlds, while simultaneously reaffirming social hierarchy. In many ways, these actors best represent what Carolyn Dean, in her study of the Inca nobility, calls "the colonizer's quandry," which is "the paradoxical need to enculturate the colonized and encourage mimesis while, at the same time, upholding and maintaining the difference that legitimizes colonization."²⁴

Finally, the significance of judicial punishment and restitution are crucial to our understandings of Spanishness and Indianness. The judiciary's role as an institutional enforcer of caste difference made it central to colonization processes. But the judiciary also reveals a contradiction in those processes, for judicial authorities did not just punish. They offered restitution, especially to the Indians on whom Spaniards expended many of their ideological and material resources, and with whom they resolved most of their labor needs. Colonial justice therefore countered colonial exploitation, a point that takes on further significance and connections to caste politics because the dual character of Spanish authority was mirrored in the Indian kind. While Indians inflicted harm through witchcraft, they also had the ability to heal. Thus, in a profoundly colonial sense the judiciary acted as a kind of sanctioned magical force controlled by Spaniards (which echoes Taussig's consideration of the "magic of reason"), while witchcraft operated as a kind of unsanctioned system of justice controlled by Indians.

A number of anthropologists have studied the cultural consequences of “high” colonial formations in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.²⁵ Their interests have included unpacking the mechanisms behind the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies; exploring tensions among classes of colonizers over colonial goals and practices; identifying confusions and contradictions in colonial ideologies; tracing the ways in which race, gender, class, and sexuality intertwined through material production; and examining the new social relations and cultural fields that brought colonizers and colonized together. Although institutional, disciplinary, and even area studies boundaries have in many ways conspired to keep anthropologists and historians unsympathetic to each other’s strengths and struggles,²⁶ people trained in both disciplines share interests in understanding the perspectives of subordinated peoples in colonial situations, and in grappling with questions of representation.²⁷ Because of this, in recent decades historians and anthropologists have both been drawn to “subalterns” and to new ways of reading colonial documents. From this, the relatively new field of historical anthropology has emerged.

Studies of subalterns show that they are not a coherent group, and that their “popular” culture is not an autonomous domain.²⁸ Subalterns might act, but not necessarily in concert, and their culture cannot be disentangled from that of elites. One of the most important contributions historical anthropology has made to these questions has been a focus on what Brian Keith Axel describes as “the ways that supposed margins and metropolises, or peripheries and centers, fold into, constitute, or disrupt one another . . . constituting new centers of inquiry, just as it demonstrates the powerful positionality of the margins right at the center.”²⁹ Central to this focus are the cultural worlds of European missionaries and colonizers, whose perspectives are rightly deemed as worthy of study as those of natives. Indeed, it is only by bringing the two sides together, and therefore destabilizing the divide, that the importance of the disruptions at the center of historical anthropological studies can be fully realized. By the same token, calls to move beyond “essentialist taxonomies of the subaltern”³⁰ — which typically fail to address the heterogeneity of subordinated persons and their experiences, and the consequent fluidity of relations of domination and subordination — recognize the difficulties of managing the tensions between simultaneously exposing power and acknowledging the agency of subordinated persons.³¹

Recent conversations among Latin Americanist historians over the “new cultural history” of Latin America, especially of Mexico, speak to the issues outlined above.³² In particular, these historians have debated the failure to move beyond essentializing taxonomies, and the related tendency of some scholars to impute too much agency to subalterns.³³ Eric Van Young thus observes that in an effort to recover the perspectives and capacities of subordinated peoples, some new cultural historians have made of agency an “apotheosis” by imputing to colonized subjects what Alan Knight refers to as a near “rational-choice” instrumentality.³⁴ As Knight notes, this leads to the resulting “paradox that subalterns, who are defined precisely by their subordinate and disempowered status, are seen to be calling the shots.”³⁵

The problem, however, might not be so much whether subalterns have agency or how much they have, as it is the tendency to approach agency as if it had a universal and uniform character. Turning our attention to culture itself will perhaps help to resolve this problem. I understand culture not as one among many distinct realms of human life, nor as a set of mentalities or ideals, but as the symbols inscribed in words and things that reflect and shape unique qualities and logics in human thought and activity. Bringing culture to bear on creative human action, Sherry Ortner reminds us of the ways in which “every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency” as the “structure of domination” ascribes to both the superordinated and the subordinated values and traits making particular kinds of action possible and others inconceivable.³⁶

Here I draw attention to how the Spanish colonial project in Mexico was itself implicated in the production of various kinds of effective actors whose practices generated various kinds of hierarchy. That project provided spaces for subalterns to act and to act subversively, but in ways that often conformed to the expectations of elites — expectations implemented by direct force but also through institutions like the judiciary, and through economic processes that inculcated networks of power. As I explore the cultural politics of caste in the colony’s sanctioned and unsanctioned domains, then, I am therefore speaking simultaneously to the intersection of subaltern and elite spaces, domination and subordination, and power and culture.

FRAMEWORK OF THE BOOK

In order to clarify the two patterns, the book treats the sanctioned domain first and for the most part separately from the unsanctioned one. In part, this organization follows colonial norms that juridically separated witchcraft from other kinds of conflicts; and in part it indicates how witchcraft was a world within the larger colonial world populated by individuals like Adriana and Ana María, and the Indians, Spaniards, and others with whom they were involved. Because witchcraft was part of and not apart from that larger world, it was as central to colonial reality as labor practices or civil controls. The sanctioned cannot therefore be fully understood without the unsanctioned, and vice versa. The reader will notice that at various points the one world creeps in as the other leaves off.

My methodological approach is interpretive. I therefore tease out from the documents thick cultural data, which I present through direct quotes from the records even as I weave together the various strands in order to systematize the meanings and social practices that caste shaped and that shaped caste. Interpretation does not eschew the laudable goal of objectivity. It rather recognizes the complexities of knowing, and of what one desires to know. Its point is to capture the noise that the statistician tends to find irksome in order to probe the deeper and messier meanings of human beliefs and behaviors, and to uncover what is inherently ambiguous and fragmented. Thus, I am reading texts that are already ambiguous and fragmented for their also ambiguous and fragmented content.

The materials are drawn mostly from colonial judicial records housed in the Mexican National Archives (AGN).³⁷ Although I do not define my work in what Knight describes as “simple time-place terms,”³⁸ most of the information pertains to Central Mexico and its vicinities. This was the most densely populated indigenous region both before and after the conquest. It had the highest concentration of colonial state institutions and activities and the largest numbers of blacks during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The records date from 1537 to 1695, with three-quarters clustered between 1590 and 1675, a period Louisa Hoberman describes as the “heart of the middle colony.”³⁹ I focus on the *longue durée* rather than on change over time, not because culture does not change but because the documentation suggests that caste patterns changed slowly, or only in their details rather than through

substantive reconfigurations. Indeed, aspects of those patterns are still apparent in parts of Mexico today.⁴⁰

The texts raise questions about documentation and construction that must be addressed, as I do in chapter 1, even if they cannot be fully answered. Chapter 1 also elaborates my understandings of what caste was, while providing an overview of political economy and judicial organization with respect to the ways that caste meanings informed—and in turn were informed by—both. Chapters 2 and 3 delineate the social fields characteristic of the sanctioned domain, first examining the Spanish/Indian relationship with particular attention to contradictions in Spanish colonial practices. The idea that these contradictions originated in Spanish perceptions of Indians as weak leads to an exploration of women/Indian analogies. Weakness favored certain kinds of colonial social affiliations and convinced elites that women and Indians could lose self-control, only to end up mired in the devilish witchcraft that gave to “passivity” a particular form of agency. Chapter 3 also investigates the ways in which blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos were put to work in the sanctioned domain, attending to how mixed-casteness itself became an idiom for arguing about rights, and to how Spaniards who facilitated the abuse Indians suffered then turned around to “heal” Indians through judicial and non-judicial interventions that punished the perpetrators.

Chapter 4 explores rebellions and alliances between Indians and the mediating blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos, focusing on the ways in which the intermingling “character” attributes of the different castes could pose challenges to Spanish authority. In chapters 5 and 6 I examine the caste hierarchies that characterized the unsanctioned domain, where Indians gained authority precisely because of their “weakness.” Again, there are parallels between women and Indians, and also between Spanish and Indian power. Here, of course, Indians are the perpetrators of “abuse,” while they also hold out the magical potential to cure. Chapter 6 addresses the entanglement of blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos in the world of witchcraft dominated by Indians. I attend to the amalgam of black/Indian witchcraft and to the surprising hybridity of the devil himself. Ultimately, I argue that the complete cycle of bewitching and healing included the Spaniards abused and cured by Indian witches, as well as the blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos to whom both Spaniards and Indians were connected.

Chapter 7 begins with a tale about a mulatto slave whose story of escaping with the magical help of an Indian brings her straight back to

Spanish justices. Using this tale to bring together the themes addressed in the book, I draw out the ways in which the objectives of witchcraft and the desires of witches were entwined with sanctioned social values. Witchcraft, I conclude, was not a revolutionary language of resistance as much as it was an affirmation of hegemony. In the end, it not only developed out of colonialism, it also upheld the allure of the wealth, mobility, and power controlled by elites.