

sex and sin, witchcraft and the devil in late-colonial Mexico

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In Mexico, as in Spain, the Inquisition was far less severe than legend would have it, showing little concern to eradicate magic and witchcraft among common people or to convict and burn them for their heterodox beliefs. Hearing cases of witchcraft, the inquisitors treated them as a religious problem that could be resolved through confession and absolution. Perhaps because of this lenient stance, or relative absence of persecution, witchcraft accusations and confessions in Mexico rarely went beyond simple acts of *maleficia* associated with sexuality and marriage. Even references to devil pacts focused on the domestic domain, especially when they involved women, and were consistent with the numerous cases against women practitioners of love magic and sexual bewitchment. In this paper I dwell in detail on specific cases brought before the Inquisition in 18th-century Mexico because they illustrate the rather tenuous foothold of official Christianity in relation to popular religion, while offering a unique, if partial, window on certain aspects of this popular religion. Deriving for the most part from the heterogeneous, racially mixed populations of central and northern Mexico in the decades before the War of Independence of 1810, the cases hint at a fascinating conjuncture of sexuality, witchcraft, and religion, in which Spanish, indigenous, and African cultures converged.

Inquisitorial activity accompanied the "spiritual conquest" of Mexico virtually from the beginning, as the early Christian missionaries struggled to "extirpate" idolatrous survivals among newly converted Indians.¹ Punishment and force played a large part in "disciplining the Indians" during this early period of evangelical fervor, as did the sweeping destruction of old cultural structures (Clendinnen 1980a; Gibson 1964:117; Trexler 1982; Behar in press). Despite these efforts, conversion among the Aztecs, as among the Maya and the Inca, remained incomplete (Klor de Alva 1982; Clendinnen 1980b; MacCormack 1985).

These harsh methods of evangelization were severely reprimanded by ecclesiastical authorities in Spain, however, and when the Mexican Inquisition was officially established in 1571 it was forbidden to prosecute Indians, who were considered too new to the faith. Only American-born creoles (referred to as "Spanish" in the records) and mestizos (offspring of Spaniards and Indians) were to be subject to the strictures of the Inquisition. With the decimation of the Indian

Analysis of Mexican Inquisition cases can shed light on various aspects of religion and belief that have gone largely unexplored in the ethnohistory of Mexico: the course that Christianization took during the 18th century, the role that women played in it, and how it affected the racially mixed areas that were growing in importance as the colonial era drew to a close. Men and women in these areas were intensely involved with beliefs linking witchcraft, sex, sin, and the devil, and constantly juggled these beliefs with contradictory beliefs fostered by the Catholic Church. The Inquisition, which played such a large role in creating these crises of conscience, paradoxically came to abandon its pursuit of "superstition" by the late 18th century, as inquisitors came to see these men and women as members of a lower class, not worthy of being held to account. [gender relations, witchcraft, evangelization, Inquisition, ethnohistory, Mexico]

population, African slaves began to be brought to Mexico in 1580; they, too, and their mixed offspring, came under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, before whose courts they appeared countless times in the course of the following centuries (cf. Alberro 1981b; Palmer 1976:146–166).

The original ideology behind the Inquisition in Mexico appears to have been that Spaniards and their descendants should set an example for the mass of newly converted Indians, or at least not contaminate them with their own misconstrued beliefs and superstitions (Alberro 1982:255). What the inquisitors eventually confronted, as individuals of every mix of white, black, and Indian appeared before them, was an interaction of peoples and beliefs—an interaction that proved a fertile ground for the flowering of a popular magical and religious culture beyond their control.² And, as the population grew, and class differences became more and more difficult to maintain in an increasingly mixed society, the inquisitors, themselves part of an elite social class, began to view the people who came before them as too low to treat seriously.

“Mestizos,” who at first formed no separate caste but were either “Spaniards” or “Indians” depending on how they lived, came to be seen by the 17th-century Spanish elite as forming part of the *gente vil*, or base folk (Israel 1975:64). Also included in this lower-status category were blacks, mulattoes (offspring of whites and blacks), Indians, and mixes of these groups. And, though theoretically ranked as *gente de razón* because of their Spanish blood, the lowest rung of the white community, with its vagabonds and drifters living from their wits in the *picaro* style, tended to fall into this category as well (Israel 1975:77).

It was this strata of *gente vil* that continually appeared in cases of superstition, witchcraft, and pacts with the devil. Such cases clustered around central Mexico, the Bajío region, and the mining areas further north. These were the more open regions of Mexican society, where intercaste mixing was common, many Indians were hispanicized, the population was mobile, and the economy, focused on ranching, mining, and peddling, was fluid and oriented towards the market. Among those who figured prominently in the records were artisans and rural proletarians employed in haciendas, sugar mills, and tobacco factories; the women, when they worked, were healers, midwives, domestic servants, and vendors of food and alcohol.

The kinds of witchcraft issues that this strata of colonial Mexicans brought before the Inquisition—domestic, and especially male/female, conflicts—had little to do with the classic Northern European concerns with community tensions, the fate of the crops and the cows, and the ethics of neighborliness. Perhaps in their more open, mixed society there was less of a possibility for corporate organization than in the Indian villages, the primary social ties being marital or based on casual contacts, rather than intense bonds of community solidarity. In Mexico City, for example, there was constant migration in and out, and women, coming alone in search of work, made up a large part of the migrant population (Arrom 1985:106–11).

It is significant that, besides witchcraft, superstition, and pacts with the devil, another important segment of Inquisition cases concerned such sexual crimes as polygamy and solicitations of women by priests in the confessional.³ Cortés himself had set the example of a loose sexual morality virtually as soon as he set foot in Mexico, living for years with his Indian mistress Doña Marina, and having to be reminded of the fact that he had a wife in Spain when he tried to marry again (Alberro 1982:242). “Illicit” sexual unions prevailed in Mexico long after the Catholic Church had sought to confine sexuality to marriage and to elevate “holy matrimony” to a Christian ideal (Stone 1985:34; cf. Flandrin 1975; Dedieu 1981; Goody 1983), a campaign that in Spain had some success (Parker 1982:520). In Europe, ecclesiastical campaigns had also rendered priests a model of chastity, but not so in late-colonial Mexico. It was within such a context that lower-class women’s magical aggression against men flourished, and was thought effective.

In marriage, women of all social levels lost most of their legal autonomy, owing total obedience to their husbands, who assumed they had the right to physically punish their wives if they deviated from proper female norms (Arrom 1985:235–238). At the same time, men of all

social ranks felt free to have illicit affairs; the double standard was even condoned by Hispanic law, since it was thought that “indecentry [was] less condemnable and offensive in a man than a woman” (Arrom 1985:65; Boxer 1975:109–112). There were certain recourses open to women in secular and ecclesiastical law: for the better-off, there was the dowry (Lavrin and Couturier 1979); separation was sometimes a possibility for women unhappy in their marriages; and women who were victims of persistent physical abuse could appeal to the judicial system for protection (Arrom 1985:218). For many women, however, a more readily available—and perhaps more efficacious—option was sexual magic and witchcraft.

The bent that witchcraft took in Mexico was similar to that of Spain, particularly Castile, where various forms of witchcraft linked to sexual and amatory themes—as exemplified by the 15th-century play *La Celestina*—were still prominent in the 17th century (Cirac Estopañán 1942:81–82; 155–156). And in both Spain and Mexico, people accused of witchcraft were treated leniently, as ignorant folk rather than heretics (Monter 1983:102; Kamen 1984:234). The Spanish Inquisition and its colonial Mexican tribunal also shared a common inquisitorial style, seeking to understand the motives of a person’s beliefs or acts rather than being concerned to establish legal responsibility for the deeds of witchcraft or magic, as were secular judges in northern Europe. Thus the outcome of a case hinged less on the question of whether a person was guilty or not guilty, than on subtler distinctions between “repentant and unrepentant sinners, between accidental and deliberate sinners, between knaves and fools” (Monter 1983:72).

The style of the Inquisition in Mexico, more understanding than adversarial, accords with one of the most striking features of its records: the large number of self-denunciations they contain. The fact that so many people voluntarily confessed their involvement in witchcraft and magic, and then followed their priest’s direction to denounce themselves to the Holy Office, points to an interiorization of inquisitorial ideas. This was a self-censoring process especially prevalent among women that began with a prohibited act and ended with a desire for reintegration into the Church. Penitents were aided in this by the self-consciously “benevolent” lenience of the inquisitors in matters such as witchcraft that they took to be of minor importance (González Casanova 1948:66–67).

Guilt, shame, and a willingness to confess everything were what mattered; and since witchcraft touched so closely on sex in the Hispanic world, the interaction of confessor and confessed became a process of transforming desire into discourse, or in the words of Michel Foucault, of “passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech” (1980:21). Let us try to hear what we can of this discourse of desire in late-colonial Mexico.

the discourse of desire

In February of 1709 Isabel de Tovar appeared, uncalled, before the Holy Office in Mexico City during its morning session to denounce herself and a *comadre* (co-godmother), Agustina de Lara, for acts labeled “superstitious” by the inquisitors. Isabel de Tovar was a native of nearby Texcoco, described as “Spanish,” about 40 years old, and a resident of Mexico City with her husband, Salvador Bermejo, also Spanish, who made and sold fireworks for a living. The woman she had come to denounce, Agustina de Lara, “who says she is Spanish,” was a midwife and healer over 45 years old married to Joseph de la Torre, a Spanish filigree artisan by profession, long employed in selling sugarcane and melons in the city plaza.

Eleven years before Isabel de Tovar had had a *mala amistad*, an illicit, literally bad, friendship, with a man who left her. Lamenting her condition to her *comadre*, Agustina de Lara told her that she would arrange to have a healer (*curandero*), an old black man whom she called Tata (“Daddy”) Nicolas, provide her with a remedy to bring her lover back. A few days later she passed by her *comadre*’s house and encountered Tata Nicolas, who asked her for three or six *reales*, she couldn’t remember exactly how much, three hairs from her “intimate parts,” and a lump of sugar.

Isabel subsequently gave the requested items to Tata Nicolas, to whose house she went after a few days, anxious to see what he had in store. Tata Nicolas gave her some very foul-smelling yellow powder wrapped in a piece of paper and instructed her to smear some of it on her lover's clothing or body, and to carry the rest on her own person. The powder was very likely made of *puyomate*, an indigenous plant widely used for purposes both of attraction and repulsion in colonial times (Aguirre Beltrán 1980:171), to which the three pubic hairs had probably been added. He had also promised to give her back the lump of sugar (ensorcelled, one supposes) for her to place in her lover's food, but she forgot if he did. The stench of the powder was so foul that she took it home and stuck it under a table; when her lover came to see her he immediately noticed the smell and scolded her for using such powders, some of which she had, indeed, managed to smear on his shirtsleeves.

After these incidents she avoided her *comadre* and Tata Nicolas, seeing them only in passing. Then two years before her confession, her lover and Tata Nicolas already dead, she again came into contact with her *comadre*, whose husband she called in to swear at her wedding that she had never been married. Her *comadre* said nothing to her at the time, but a month later when Isabel went to visit her at Christmas she asked Isabel how her marriage was going. Even though Isabel insisted the marriage was going well, her *comadre* gave her a bundle to carry around with her, with two little sticks in it from trees she didn't recognize, to prevent her husband from leaving her. The little sticks also had a foul smell, though not so foul as the powder Tata Nicolas had given her, and when she got home she took the bundle and hid it away in a box; later she moved it to another room, then she kept it under her bed for a few days. For a long time she wanted to destroy the bundle but there were people in the house; the day before her confession she had taken the whole thing and burned it.

Isabel recalled how on meeting with her *comadre's* husband in the plaza, he had told her that his wife got along quite well as a midwife and healer, curing the ensorcelled by removing spider webs and worms from their bodies. When Isabel recounted this conversation to her mother, who lived with her, the mother had called out to the Holy Sacrament, telling her daughter to hush and not speak of such things, that God help them, and that she not have anything to do with such people. The last time Isabel saw her *comadre*, an Indian from the countryside was being brought to her to be cured. We learn, too, that Isabel brought her confession to the Inquisition because her parish priest refused to absolve her until she did so.

Hearing her confession, the inquisitor scolded Isabel for having burned the little sticks of her own authority after having had them in her possession for such a long time (the inquisitors liked seeing real evidence of magical practices, whether it consisted of sticks, powders, drawings, or pacts). Following the scolding, she was instructed to recite a station of the Holy Sacrament for 8 days and to report any further information to the Holy Office on penalty of excommunication.

This testimony is followed by another presented to the Holy Office 2 months later by Marta Picon, *castiza* (part mestiza, part Spanish), an unmarried woman of 21 originally from the city of Oaxaca, employed as a maid in Mexico City. She, too, came to denounce Agustina de Lara, whom she had gotten to know while working in her house as a seamstress. Marta Picon had an inside view of another aspect of Agustina de Lara's activities as a dealer in love-magic. She saw and heard how various women came to Agustina for *chupamirtos* (hummingbirds) and powders to "attract and enamour men," which Agustina obtained, the first from an Indian woman, the second from an Indian man. Agustina de Lara had told Marta Picon that she learned her craft from another woman, María de los Ríos, who had been apprehended by the Holy Office. How, Marta had asked her, did she dare to continue her dealings in such things knowing that? Agustina had answered that it didn't matter, that she would know how to respond to the Holy Office if the need arose.⁴

The two testimonies provide us with a vivid portrait of the New World Celestina, in close contact with other peoples and other magical cultures. Although Spanish, Agustina de Lara obtained the powders and hummingbirds she used in her work from two Indians, and she was on affectionate enough terms with a black healer to call him Tata. Her very use of the hum-

mingbird, a bird native to the New World (and important symbolically in prehispanic times as Huitzilopochtli, the war god), also reflects the extent to which indigenous elements formed part of her multilayered magical repertoire.

Hummingbirds were widely used in colonial Mexico for attracting lovers of the opposite sex, though their production and distribution was controlled by Indians (Quezada 1975:100). Sometimes their skeletons were carried around as amulets, or the birds were ground into powder and dusted on clothing. Agustina de Lara decorated the birds with ribbons, and with pearls for those better off. The sexual symbolism of this unique bird, with its long beak, which it uses to suck the honey out of flowers, was clearly not lost upon colonial Mexicans; its small insect-like size also made it highly transportable. From the Inquisition records it appears that most blacks, mestizos, and mulattoes carried some type of amatory bundle sewn into their clothing, and that many used hummingbirds (Aguirre Beltrán 1980:169). Nor was it just women who made use of the magic of attraction; both sexes were fond of this "superstition."⁵

Even though such magical activity was elaborated and widespread, there was a strongly developed sense that it went against the faith. Isabel de Tovar was scolded by her lover for using the foul powders (which she had tried to conceal), and she herself eventually burned the little sticks (having sought to conceal them, too) that her *comadre* had given her to keep her husband from straying; her mother, admonishing Isabel to hush, had called out to the Holy Sacrament upon hearing of Agustina de Lara's ability to remove sorcery objects. Marta Picon certainly seemed appalled by what she saw taking place in Agustina de Lara's house, and it was she who directly asked this healer if she didn't fear the Inquisition.

Out of professional bravado, perhaps, Agustina de Lara refused to show any fear of the Inquisition. But novices like Isabel de Tovar, who flirted with the magic of attraction, followed the contradictory pattern of engaging in prohibited acts only to later purge themselves through confession. Her accusation against Agustina de Lara, and that of the shocked Marta Picon, had little to do with hatred, competition, or a desire for vengeance. These were spontaneous confessions that, like those of so many other auto-confessors in this period, were the products of an interiorization of inquisitorial ideas. Consciousness of these ideas was so much a part of everyday life that it came naturally to colonial Mexicans like Isabel de Tovar's mother to say "hush" when presented with practices that went against the faith.

In another case brought before the tribunal of Guadalajara in 1740 we get a further glimpse of this process of interiorization, while seeing the attitude of the inquisitors towards confessions of magical pursuits. The case opens in the convent of San Francisco with the meeting of Fray Clemente de Arellano, a deputy of the Inquisition in Guadalajara, and a Spanish woman named Maria Antonia Gallegos dressed in widow's clothing, who had gone in search of him. Fray Clemente recounted how perturbed, confused, and embarrassed this woman was, virtually running up to him and spontaneously pouring out a garbled confession. So flustered was she to have to speak that her confessor had written a letter on her behalf explaining the case, in which her confession had been copied out verbatim. As in the case of Isabel de Tovar, the confessor had refused to absolve her until she brought her confession to the Inquisition. Fray Clemente passed the case and the letter on to his superior, Fray Pedro de Ribera, a censor of the Inquisition in Guadalajara.

The confession of Maria Antonio Gallegos, as expressed in the letter, is a journey in the realm of popular "superstitions" about sexual attraction. She began by recounting how, 8 years before, overwhelmed by curiosity, she looked through the clothing of a drunken mulatto who had fallen asleep in her house. She found a "curious bundle," inside of which there was a skeleton of a little animal, clearly a hummingbird; she showed the bundle to her mother who told her it was good for attracting men and having money, and for bringing evil upon those who wished one ill. Maria Antonia had hoped to keep the bundle, but her mother burned it the next day. To see if such a thing worked, 6 years earlier she and her sister-in-law had gone in search of the bird's nest and, not finding the birds, they took the two little eggs they found there. Each wore an egg around her neck for a day or two until one broke and the other was lost.

She had heard that for attracting men it was good to give them to drink the water in which a woman had washed her "shameful parts." She had once served such water to an unmarried man she wanted to attract. Then she heard that a sorceress (*hechicera*) instructing another woman what she could do to get her lover to return to her, had told her to take a leech and place it on her leg, then give it, with the blood, to the man to drink. She confessed she had subjected the same bachelor who had drunk her wash water to the leech treatment.

Once, desiring greatly to see this man, she had called to the saints to bring him to her. When such invocation failed, she implored the Devil and took her rosary off for 2 or 3 hours. The man still failed to appear, so she put her rosary back on.

At another time she heard her mother remark to another woman how she feared her husband might stray on a trip he was taking to Mexico City and find someone else; the woman had told her she would give her a drink to serve him that would bring him back. Lately her mother had told her that a friend used a remedy to keep her lover at her side, "and this remedy was menstrual blood mixed with hairs from the shameful parts," served, no doubt as occurred in a multitude of cases, in the New World drinks of cocoa or pulque. She herself had since passed this remedy on to two or three other women.

Colonial Mexican women made frequent culinary use of their washwater, menstrual blood, and pubic hair to attract men or to keep them from straying; even when they did not actually use these "remedies," they were familiar with the lore and continually passed it on to other women, as was true of Maria Antonia Gallegos. The records of the Mexican Inquisition are replete with examples of such ensorcelling of food by women, a practice that was common in pre-Hispanic times as well as in contemporary Castile (cf. Sahagun 1981 [2]:150–151; Cirac Estopañán 1942:81–83). Since food preparation was one domain over which women held virtually total control, their ability to use this power subversively was widely recognized and even feared by men (Aguirre Beltrán 1980:227).

This magic was highly sexual, and thus for Maria Antonia as for other colonial women it was embarrassing to have to speak of these matters to a priest. In the end, whatever power was granted to women in the domain of food magic was betrayed by the need to confess to a male, who represented patriarchal domination in another form. The imperative to enter into a dialogue about these matters, which Maria Antonia knew to be unholy even as she engaged in them, was so strong that she overcame her shame and even sought out the inquisitorial officers who could grant her absolution. From her confession one has the sense that she kept her eyes and ears open for magical alternatives to mere faith in Catholicism, just as with equal ease she could test the powers of God, the saints, or the Devil for her own purposes. Her crisis of conscience came later, in retrospect, as she tried to sort through potential sins to confess.

As for the reaction of the censor Fray Pedro de Ribera to her confession, it was one of surprise and impatience for having had to deal with such a minor case. There was no need, he felt, for the confessor to have sent Maria Antonia to the Inquisition to receive absolution. Although, he noted, they could have called upon the other delinquents in the case, namely her mother and sister-in-law, neither had committed a true heresy; as for the mulatto with the bird's skeleton, since he was drunk it was pointless to take his actions seriously. "All the other things mentioned in the case are such vulgar abuses that, though worthy of being reprimanded most harshly in the confession box, do not oblige the confessor to denounce [to the Inquisition] the persons involved" (AGN Inq. 908, exp. 2).

Such a lenient attitude towards sexual magic on the part of the inquisitors was typical by the 18th century; here, as in the case of Isabel de Tovar and many others, the worried penitent was let off with nothing more than a scolding. Maria Antonia's own attitude, by contrast, shows the degree to which she had interiorized the Edicts of Faith that the Inquisition put forth.⁶ In a society where the Church had insinuated itself into every aspect of sexuality and the family domain, from setting marriage rules to mediating in cases of wife abuse, it is not surprising to see Maria Antonia turn to the Church to resolve her own ambivalence towards sexuality and sexual magic. On the other hand, the very leniency of the inquisitors made it possible for networks of

healers like Agustina de Lara and uncertain believers like Maria Antonia to pass the word on about magical alternatives to the Church's mediation in domestic affairs. Sexual magic was not limited to that of attraction; men could also be tamed, even "tied," into a kind of submission that turned the social and sexual order topsy-turvy enough for even the local deputies, if not the inquisitors, to take notice.

women and witchcraft

In 1716 the mestiza Gertrudis Antonia del Castillo, who was married to an Indian, denounced her neighbor and friend, Lusiana, before the local Inquisition deputy of the hacienda of San Antonio-Tlaxomulco, in the eastern part of what is today the state of Mexico. Her confession began as follows:

Being a close friend of Lusiana and my husband just having given me a slap in the face, I ran into Lusiana in the bathing room, where she asked me if I wanted a remedy to take away my husband's drinking vice. I said I did and the next day she called me over to her house and told me to give my husband cemetery dirt to drink, that with this you tamed [*amansaba*] men, that in this way she had hers very well tamed [AGN Inq. 878, f. 401].

Lusiana tried to give her the water prepared with the cemetery dirt three times, but Gertrudis always refused to take it. Then Lusiana asked her for the tails of three large rats, which she gave her, and Lusiana returned one with a string of agave fiber tied onto it, advising her to attach it to her husband's headboard with his own hair so he would cease to fool around with other women. Lusiana also recommended that she wash under her arms and lower parts and give this water to men to drink in cocoa so they would be attracted to her. All these remedies, which Lusiana herself used, she had obtained for two pesos from a mulatta butcheress named Chomba.

Lusiana bragged to Gertrudis about how she had tamed her husband and was free to go wherever she pleased. Before, he had been jealous and of bad disposition, but since she had used the remedies she had gotten him under control; just recently, Lusiana recounted, she had gone to help the women who cooked for the visit of the provincial officer, and her husband hadn't said a word (such, indeed, were the small triumphs of liberty colonial women could brag about). Again Lusiana insisted that Gertrudis accompany her to the bathing room so she could give her the ingredient that would tame her husband, too (and, as a side effect, also give him stomach problems). But Gertrudis refused, and afterwards Lusiana begged her—with the usual awareness of the inquisitorial presence—not to tell anyone anything of what she had told her, "not even the mother who had borne her."

This case posed a slight problem for the inquisitors in Mexico City, to whom it was sent by the local deputy, since they were not told whether Lusiana was Indian. If Indian, then the Inquisition could not intervene in her case. If not, their counsel was lenient: to scold her "paternally and without being obstreperous, exhorting her to live like a good Catholic." As for Gertrudis, she was to be set right and told to burn and dispose of any instruments, powders, or beverages she had been given, and to remove herself from the bad company of Lusiana.

The inquisitors paid no attention to a significant note about Lusiana that the local deputy had appended to the confession. In this note, the deputy remarked that Lusiana's husband had been ill for a long time, and that no doctor had been able to figure out what illness he suffered from, nor had any of the cures that had been administered given him any relief. Some people, he noted, said the man's illness was an *hechizo*, an act of sorcery, and one doctor had described the man as "spooked" (*espiritado*). The deputy seemed to be suggesting to his superiors in Mexico City that Lusiana might, indeed, have done something strange to her husband (AGN Inq. 878, f. 401). But this message, like so many others that pointed to the fact that women's witchcraft was efficacious in the local setting, went past the inquisitors.

When the mestiza Magdalena de la Mata, a woman over 50 years of age, came before the tribunal of San Juan del Río in 1715, it was more to denounce herself than the Indian woman

who had given her a remedy for taming her husband (AGN Inq. 878, f. 314–316). She began her confession, as did Gertrudis, by recalling an incident of domestic violence: how on one occasion her husband, Agustín de la Cruz Mancilla, also a mestizo, and the owner of a drove of beasts of burden, had beaten her so badly that he had made her bleed. Seeing herself treated so wretchedly by her husband, upset and angry, Magdalena went to Beatris, an Indian woman, and asked her to give her an herb she could use on her husband so he wouldn't be such a womanizer; and so he would cease making her life so miserable, cease giving her such a *mala vida*.

Beatris took her aside and, with the usual secrecy, telling her to speak to no one, "not even her own daughter," about the remedy she would give her, she proceeded to explain to Magdalena how to go about producing a magical ligature or "tying" (*ligatura*) that would make her husband impotent.⁷ The remedy was to take an egg, pierce it with a straw, and in it place a few of her husband's hairs; then she was to bury the egg in the ground where her husband urinated. Following these steps, Beatris claimed, Magdalena's husband would be "tied" (*ligado*). Upon hearing this, Magdalena worriedly interjected that, though she wanted to punish her husband by tying him so he wouldn't be able to have intercourse with her or any other women, she didn't want this to turn into a permanent condition. Beatris told her not to worry, that she also knew how to undo the tying (see Figure 1).

Magdalena then pierced the egg, filled it with her husband's hairs, and buried it, pouring some of his urine over the ground. But 24 hours later, she confessed, she ran back to the site



Figure 1. A contemporary Mexican sorceress used this doll to "tie" her client's husband to the house. Mexican, San Luis Potosí, 1985 (Photograph by Ruth Behar).

and unburied the egg, overcome with repentance for having carried out such a ludicrous act (*disparate*). Throwing the egg away, she exclaimed, "to the Devil with you!" And she had been crying ever since, begging God to have mercy on her, as she also begged of this Holy Tribunal.

Her local parish confessor, she said, had refused to absolve her until she confessed to the Inquisition. Actually, she admitted, she had been on the verge of keeping quiet about this sin altogether, but looking into her soul she had seen that she had to confess it. She cried as she spoke, and the inquisitor, "seeing her tears, and her repentance, and her demonstration of faith . . . told her to attend to the fact that she is Christian, and that she should never be afraid to confess her sins to her confessor and that she should always confess what is most particular, and that which seemed the most shameful to her." So long as she confessed and truly repented, the inquisitor assured her, she would always be pardoned by the Holy Tribunal. With this, and a caution about not paying heed to superstitions and criticizing them whenever she came across them, she was absolved (AGN Inq. 878, f. 314–316).

The notions of sin, guilt, and devotion propounded by the Church, which women were taught to take especially seriously (Lavrin 1983:45), often made it impossible for them to use the magical resources at their disposal for retaliating against their husbands when they exceeded the bounds of proper conjugal dominance. It is uncommon (though not unheard of) for women in Mexico today to hit their husbands back if beaten; according to the records, few dared to do so in the 18th century. What political and economic control lower-class women, especially married women, had was negligible, and they were frequently victims of a husband's aggression both in the countryside and in towns (Taylor 1979:88, 95; Arrom 1985:232–238).

Since women were left with few domains in which to assert themselves, they developed, in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, a rich symbolic language of beliefs and acts for resisting, punishing, and even controlling the men who dominated them. This was a language saturated with violence: just as men hit their wives, women retaliated against their husbands, with a more subtle form of violence. And because the Mexican Inquisition treated offenders in a lenient, paternal fashion, it drew to itself a part of this dialogue about male/female conflict and sexual witchcraft. The details of that dialogue were of little interest to the inquisitors; what mattered most to them was that what was confessed be "that which seemed the most shameful" and that the confession be accompanied by the requisite sinner's "tears of contrition," so important to early modern Spanish religious devotion (Christian 1982:107).

The Inquisition thus did little to hinder the diffusion of sexual witchcraft among women of the various caste strata of colonial Mexico. Yet the position of women remained equivocal. Women, unable to reconcile the contradictions between the proper behavior expected of them as Catholics and the witchcraft they knew for attracting, taming, and tying men, ended up by expressing disgust and self-hatred. They threw away the remedies they had used, became angry with themselves for the violent emotions they had given vent to, and ran tearfully to confess to the parish priest and the inquisitors, seeking absolution.

For Magdalena de la Mata the internalization of the Church's teaching on sin, strengthened almost certainly by hearing an Edict of Faith read at mass, effectively repressed her desire to see her husband "tied." But some women were more bold, as we see in the following accusation by a "tied" man against his former mistress.

In 1709 Lorenzo Martínez Montañés, a Spanish horseshoer in his early fifties who resided in Mexico City, went to the Holy Tribunal to denounce Bonifacia Miranda, an unmarried mestiza who dressed like a Spanish woman and had been his mistress. Why did Lorenzo think Bonifacia had tied him, the inquisitor wanted to know, and was this obstruction something he just felt with his wife, or with other women as well? Lorenzo responded that during his contact with Bonifacia she used to give him cocoa and things to eat, in which, he suspects, she carried out her *maleficio*. He also remembered that 6 years before, as he engaged in sexual intercourse with Bonifacia, he felt a hair cross his "virile member"; since consummating that act he had become impotent with his wife. Yet, just 3 years before, when he saw Bonifacia again, he was

able to have intercourse with her without feeling any impediment. This, he reasoned, was a clear sign that Bonifacia had caused his impotence with his wife.

Aside from responding to the questions of the inquisitor, Lorenzo also brought a letter written and signed by himself in which he explained why he was convinced Bonifacia had tied him; he had also had this statement ratified by five witnesses. In the letter he spoke of his illicit affair with Bonifacia, which had lasted for 2 years, during which time they had a daughter. Having grown tired of this affair and wanting to break off, he suggested to Bonifacia that he become her *compadre* and baptize the girl. *Compadres*, or co-godparents, though in one sense spiritual kin, are also considered real kin and, according to the Church, are barred from engaging in sexual relations with one another. In this manner Lorenzo cleverly proposed to break off sexual relations with Bonifacia, while continuing to maintain a spiritual link with his daughter.

This proposition angered Bonifacia and she announced that if he dared do such a thing “he would remember her all his life.” She also wished that his wife, who was already sick, would die. Even so, no longer wanting to maintain the relationship, he had ignored her curses, until he realized she had, indeed, tied and ensorcelled him. In so doing, Bonifacia had effectively “unmarried” him, since he could no longer consummate his marriage with his wife, “which had caused irreparable damage and discord, having to be at war with his wife who knows he has been tied by said Bonifacia Miranda.” Symbolically, Bonifacia, the mistress, had become equal to the wife: both were equally unmarried.

In these cases, as in any form of *maleficium*, it was common for the man who had been tied to seek out the woman who had tied him and demand a cure. Lorenzo had tried, but Bonifacia avoided him. When he saw her with her mother and sister one day, they had advised him to cut his hair, which he did, but to no avail; another day, they advised him to see Juan Guerrero the surgeon, who only confirmed him in his belief that he had been ensorcelled (*hechizado*). After he had gone to confess all this, his confessor sent him to the Holy Tribunal for absolution, to whom he then went in the hope that, in his words, such “an execrable sin will be punished and he will be cured and be able to live quietly and peacefully again with his wife” (AGN Inq. 765, exp. 9).

It is significant that Lorenzo went not to unburden his conscience of the illicit affair he had carried on, in violation of the bounds of marriage, but to denounce the ex-mistress who he now believed prevented his return to the marriage bed. As an adulterer he had been ensorcelled in the classic form described in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the 15th-century European treatise on witchcraft, finding himself unable to have intercourse with his legitimate wife (Kramer and Sprenger 1971 [1486]:98,168). Though colonial Mexican men must have known they were doing wrong when they took other women, it appears from these Inquisition records that they were less concerned with the morality of their own actions than with the fact that they sinned at their own peril. They seemed to fear the Church less than women’s witchcraft; it is ironic that men like Lorenzo could, when they felt themselves ensorcelled, seek the aid of the Church. Ultimately, both men and women channeled their domestic conflicts into a religious dialogue—so well had the Church linked itself with the domain of marriage and sexuality.

pacts with the devil

From the 16th century, pacts with the Devil were important in Mexico; by the 18th century they were an integral part of the magical domain of male/female relations we have been examining so far. According to the Inquisition records, these pacts were entered into by both women and men, but women’s pacts were more often linked with acts of *maleficium* and witchcraft, while men’s pacts tended to fall into the category of explicit, and often self-conscious, heresy.⁸ The Devil was viewed by many colonial Mexicans not so much as a horrible and frightening creature, but as a figure who in times of crisis offered solace, conversation, and the illusion of hope. At times, too, it appeared to people that the Devil listened and responded



Figure 2. Jose Miguel del Sacramento, an acrobat and baker, was brought before the Inquisition of Guadalajara in 1790 for having in his possession this "ridiculous drawing" of the Devil. Graphic materials frequently appeared in the records of the Inquisition as "evidence" of an accused person's dealings with witchcraft, magic, or the Devil (Illustration 4895, from the graphic collection of the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City).

to their problems more directly and quickly than God, and that the Devil's magic was more efficacious than the magic of the Church (see Figure 2).

Christian evangelization, in Mexico as in most of the New World, produced an infatuation with the Devil and an elaboration of devil-beliefs that the early friars had never foreseen (cf. Taussig 1980). It was an infatuation that, by late-colonial times, the Mexican Inquisition no longer sought to control by means of harsh discipline and punishment, as had been the case in the 16th century (Greenleaf 1969:173). Instead, devil beliefs, like women's efforts to magically

attract, tame, and tie men, were allowed to slip through the cracks in a bureaucracy that increasingly abandoned the challenge of evangelizing the lower classes. Let us consider from among the many cases available three examples of devil pacts that were made during the waning years of Mexico's Inquisition.

Maria Rosa, known to her neighbors as *Maria Grande*, was an *arrimada*, a hanger-on in the hacienda of Espiritu Santo in the Zacatecan Sierra de Pinos, who claimed in 1747 to have had a 20-year pact with the Devil. A *loba* (Afro-Indian mestiza) in her fifties, who wore a long braid and was marked by smallpox, Maria Rosa explained to the inquisitor that she had been taught "the art" of sorcery by another woman, Maria Cristina, a *coyota* (part mestiza, part Indian) who lived in the city of San Luis Potosí; she had gone to consult with Maria Cristina after her husband had run off with an Indian woman. Maria Cristina was a sorceress (*hechicera*) and she had told Maria Rosa that if she wanted to know where her husband was, she would teach her about "her art." Maria Cristina then led her into another room where she encountered "a little dog, who spoke to her, telling her to remove her rosary and not to follow the one on the cross but to follow him." Attentive to Maria Cristina's instructions, Maria Rosa kissed the dog's posterior and "the damned one then promised to help her in any way he could."

More recently, after moving to the Hacienda de Espiritu Santo, where a son and daughter of hers worked, Maria Rosa had engaged in illicit affairs with two men half her age, Juan Leonisio and Vicente Ferrer. She had ensorcelled them with the Devil's help, using a few little pebbles and her own touch, because, she claimed, they had been miserly, going to see her when they pleased and not once having given her a little money to buy some bread or a blouse.

Indeed, it was these two young men who brought the case to the local tribunal of the Inquisition in Aguascalientes, claiming that both had engaged in affairs with Maria Rosa and that now she had them both paralyzed in the legs (*tullidos*). They had taken her out to the countryside, where they stripped and beat her until she admitted she had ensorcelled them and agreed to cure them (which she did, skillfully sucking out bits of sand and pine roots from their hips). On that occasion, as she was being beaten, she had called out to the Devil and they had seen a bright red dog come to her defense, from which they had escaped by making the sign of the Holy Cross and beseeching the saints.

After she had cured the two men, the administrator of the hacienda, Don Ignacio Urruchua, took her aside and questioned her. How, he asked her, had she dared to ensorcel (*maleficar*) the two men, "without fear of God and not keeping before her the fact that she was Christian, and did she not know that if she had died she would have been hopelessly condemned, and had her confessors not obliged her to divorce herself from such sin?" To which Maria Rosa simply answered, that, yes, they had, but her evil nature hadn't allowed her to do otherwise. Don Ignacio also wanted to know if the Devil had appeared to her as a man or an animal, and if she had engaged in sexual intercourse with him. "The Devil," Maria Rosa said, "had only appeared to her in the figure of a dog that hung around her skirts and cajoled her and talked to her, and who would affectionately scratch her if she didn't pay attention to him."⁹

In this case, once more, the domestic and the religious domains are closely linked; but, unlike the women we have seen involved in taming and tying, Maria Rosa reacted to her troubles with her husband by turning consciously away from the Church and dedicating herself to sorcery and the Devil. There was, indeed, a kind of domesticity in her relations with the Devil, as she described them, as if she had replaced her husband—married by the Church, but unfaithful—with an evil, yet ever-loyal companion.

Like Maria Rosa, Juana de los Santos, a woman considered to be Spanish, who lived in an hacienda in the town of Senticpac, not far from Tepic in Nayarit, had entered into a pact with the Devil after troubles with her husband. But Juana's relation with the Devil was of a different order, verging more on a kind of demonic possession; she was also a much younger woman—just 26 years old at the time of her trial in 1736—who had married a mulatto when she was 14. Her pact with the Devil had lasted for 7 years, and her sole reason for having entered into it,

so she claimed, was to be able to know the goings-on of her husband in his illicit affairs and to take vengeance on his mistresses.

A desperate woman, Juana de los Santos sought strength, attention, friendship, and control through her pact with the Devil. Asked how she had entered into it, she recalled how on one occasion, after her husband had beaten her, she uttered these words: "a legion of demons won't come and carry me away!" The next day the Devil appeared to her at vespers—in the form of her husband. When she called the Devil by her husband's name, he didn't answer, but just followed her, like a real man, until they reached a fig tree. This frightened her so much that she began to recite a rosary to the Virgin, though if she finished it she couldn't remember, because she fell at her doorstep, terrified and screaming. The neighbors came and she was consoled, but her fear continued day and night.

Two months later she met an old woman, Ana, a widow, who like her had married a mulatto. The old woman told her that soon after getting married her husband had made her life miserable (*le daba mala vida*), and she entered into a pact with the Devil that had gotten her out of her troubles. Juana accepted from the old woman a flower from a fig tree and a picture of the Devil, with which, she assured her, she would be released from her troubles and know all of her husband's affairs.

Later that day Juana saw another apparition of the Devil by a brook; this time he appeared to her as a handsome young mulatto dressed in black and white. The Devil asked her if her husband beat her, and she said he did, and he told her to fast for 2 Sundays. She fasted, and when the Devil reappeared he asked for her soul in exchange for knowing all of her husband's affairs and being able to defend herself against his mistresses. Juana, however, refused to part with her soul; hearing this, the Devil became angry and upset and began to strike himself with sticks. As consolation Juana told the Devil that she would have to see if things went well with him; only then would she give him her soul.

After these encounters the Devil became a kind of friend, coming to see her every day to ask how things were going with her husband. If they were talking and another person walked into the room, the Devil would conveniently turn into a little dog and tug at her skirts. Asked by the inquisitor if during this friendship with the Devil she wore a rosary, prayed, went to mass, received the sacraments, or heard sermons, she answered no to everything. Though her husband had forced her to go to mass during her first year of friendship with the Devil, she had always sneaked out and gone somewhere else; and during Lent that year she confessed and received the Host, but had taken the form out of her mouth and buried it in the church (an act which the inquisitors interrogated her about repeatedly, and which had been one of the main reasons for her arrest). After that first year, she never went to church, confessed, or wore a rosary for the remaining 6 years of her friendship with the Devil.

For reasons that are not altogether clear, Juana had given up this friendship 5 years before she appeared before the Inquisition—perhaps because her husband had eventually left her. In any case, she turned herself in by telling the authorities of her pact with the Devil and her desire to break out of it.

During this period the Devil continued to pursue her, and when she was in the house of the *mayordomo* of the hacienda, where she had been deposited by the authorities for the period of her trial, she would scream out. The people in the *mayordomo's* house would break into prayer, and she would beg them to commend her to God so she could be freed of her troubles. The Devil would continue to put up resistance, and on several occasions, so she claimed, she had to tie him up and beat him with a stick or a whip. Asked how she was able to do this, she replied that she "carried" the Devil, so she had power over him rather than he over her, and that this was something the old woman Ana had taught her.

At this point in her interrogation she was asked if she was sick, or suffered from some wound, or had lost her faculties or her wits, to which she replied that she was fine and sane. Throughout her trial the authorities had wondered if she was ill or suffering from some form of dementia, but none of the witnesses had lent support to this idea. The degree to which she had elaborated

her devil relationship clearly struck them as inexplicably odd. But in the end what mattered was that she had returned to the fold of the Church—more or less. When asked who was the stronger, God or the Devil, she replied (correctly) that God, of course, is the stronger, and that the Devil is an evil spirit who cannot possibly be equal to God. Yet immediately afterwards she spoke of how the Devil had, indeed, carried out his part of the bargain, because during the period of the pact she had managed to catch her husband with a woman named Juana de Simon and had been able to beat her repeatedly with a stick. Her soul was not lost to God—still, the Devil had proved himself a worthy contender.¹⁰

The image Juana de los Santos had of the Devil seems to conform neatly to an alter ego of her husband. For her, the Devil was a mulatto who, unlike her husband, was a kind companion to her, and most importantly he was a husband figure whom she had under her control (even if he also, at times, possessed her to the point of domination). The use Juana de los Santos made of the Devil contrasts with that of Maria Grande, who, disillusioned and abandoned, dedicated her life to evil, to the practice of maleficent sorcery and to the Devil. Still, the image of the Devil as an affectionate little dog figured in both their accounts, as it did in so many other women's testimonies—obedient, loyal, and attentive in his dog form; powerful, evil, demanding in his Devil form.

These two pacts with the devil were more extreme than the folk remedies we looked at earlier for taming and tying husbands and straying lovers. Women called in the Devil, it seems, as a last resort, when male dominance and the double standard could no longer be reconciled with God and the saints and all the other consolations the Church had to offer. At the very least, devil pacts implied a temporary, or even fairly permanent, rejection of the religiosity of sin, guilt, confession, and penance, a sense of being beyond salvation. As a contrast to these women's experience, let us look at one final case from 1794, of a young Spanish man's pact with the Devil. This case involves Juan Manuel de Rosas, a 22-year-old Spanish farm worker from the town of Huehuetlán in the environs of the city of Pachuca who, moved by mission preaching in his town, decided to reform his ways and confess his sins. It opens with a letter from Juan Manuel's confessor, a mission friar, to the Holy Tribunal in Mexico City, wondering what to do with this penitent who had given the Devil a written contract for his soul, and on whose arm the Devil, in exchange, had tattooed his "horrendous figure."

The friar, as convinced as his penitent, especially wanted to know how he should go about retrieving the contract from the Devil and erasing the diabolic tattoo, "which was impossible [to erase] through natural means." Although the inquisitors in Mexico City never answered these questions, they did give the friar permission to carry out a full investigation of the case; thus Juan Manuel's confession, taken down over a period of several days, filled many pages, until the friar was satisfied that Juan Manuel had understood his sins, repented, and abjured his heresy, so he could absolve him.

Juan Manuel entered into a pact with the Devil after his planned marriage fell through when an uncle claimed kinship to the second degree with the woman he was about to wed. Angered and upset by this sudden turn of events, Juan Manuel had gone off, "screaming to all the devils," and sure enough, the Devil appeared to him that night under the shade of a tree in the form of a monkey, speaking to him, significantly, in a woman's voice. He told the Devil he wanted to get the woman out of the house where she had been deposited, and the Devil told him he could accomplish this task easily if he simply wrote up a contract signing away his soul to him. Juan Manuel knew that his friend, Anastasio, a Spanish cowherder, had signed away his soul to the Devil to get out of jail, and seeing Anastasio that night he asked him to write out a contract for him, too, since he did not know how to write.

That very night, Juan Manuel recalled, he also saw the woman he had wanted to marry pass in front of where the Devil was standing under the tree. Juan Manuel grabbed her in his arms and beat her and broke her head, and the Devil told him to kill her and sin with her. But he didn't want to kill her or sin with her, and he let her go back to her mother's house, where she still lived. In all probability, this apparition reflected his ambivalence about the woman he

wanted to marry and it is interesting to contrast his readiness to beat her with, say, the desire of Juana de los Santos to be able to beat, not her husband, but her husband's mistresses. Here we see something of the different codes for men and women concerning permissible physical violence.

Asked about his beliefs in the afterlife, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and every aspect of Catholic doctrine, Juan Manuel claimed he had never believed anything. And questioned about his style of life during the last few years, he admitted to having lived very loosely, claiming to have deflowered a virgin and engaged in intercourse with five married women, ten widows, and 22 unmarried women. Asked why he desired the sacrament of marriage if he didn't believe in Catholic doctrine, he replied that he had wanted "to marry brutishly, to let his nature loose and to have someone to sin with, as others do, but without believing that this was a sacrament or that it produced grace."

Thus were the double standard and marriage conceived, at least from one man's point of view. But for Juan Manuel, it was not himself, but his friend, Anastasio, who was the apotheosis of manhood. Anastasio had long ago sold his soul to the Devil, whom he had encountered in a cave that he proudly pointed out to Juan Manuel when the two of them went out with the herds, telling him that in that cave the Devil had given him the virtue of being a good horseman and a valiant bullfighter. "Don't try to be a saint or a *beato* (holy person)," Anastasio would say to him, "for God doesn't have the faculties the Devil does." In keeping with this notion, Anastasio had lived in casual unions with several women, frequently got drunk, had no shame, and was insolent with people; as Juan Manuel noted, he never confessed, took communion, or went to mass, and never did anything good. But Juan Manuel, again for reasons that are not totally clear (perhaps mission preaching proved effective?), had seen the light, and with tears in his eyes had decided to confess everything. He had even sent a message to Anastasio, by way of an aunt who lived in the *rancho* where he was a herder, to confess as well and repent of his evil life, but by then Anastasio had already moved on to another *rancho* (AGN Inq. 1389, exp. 3).

Although Juan Manuel finally abjured and was absolved, his case provides a male point of view on the kind of sexual ideal he had to live up to—namely, that men were supposed to have a lot of women, be valiant, stay away from the Church, and *not* be good. It was, of course, this very ideal—or more specifically the expression of this ideal in everyday life—that women were reacting to with their folk remedies of attraction, taming and tying, and their own recourse to pacts with the Devil. The Church, always in the middle, with its ideas of sin, guilt, and confession, mediated between these two discordant discourses but never fully transformed either one, leaving them to form their own uneasy counterpoint.

conclusions

If the Inquisition records are an indication, in the interchange of magical cures and remedies that took place in colonial Mexico, the social groups that juridically formed different castes interacted closely, sharing and spreading a complex repository of supernatural knowledge about marital and sexual relationships that the inquisitors simply called "superstition" and "witchcraft." Indian women gave hummingbirds to Spanish healers for use in sexual attraction, mulatta women told mestiza women how to tame their husbands, a *loba* sorceress introduced a *coyota* to the Devil. This, shall we say "popular," system of belief ran parallel to the system of belief of the Church, and it spread as quickly as Christianity did in the New World, so that after a while it became impossible to distinguish what in it was "Indian" or "Spanish" or "African."

The Holy Office of the Inquisition eventually lost interest in these matters. By the end of the 18th century and certainly by the beginning of the 19th, the inquisitors treated witchcraft and superstition cases not merely with paternal lenience, but with contempt. This change of attitude

followed the development of class ideas, and the gradual merging of caste groups into a broad lower stratum of "mestizos." Although we find evidence of a lack of interest in "superstition" on the part of the inquisitors from the beginning of the 18th century, it was only at the end of the century, after notions of class were given conscious voice, that outright scorn appeared, as in the following examples.

In 1792 a *loba* sorceress was denounced to the Inquisition by Vicente Araujo, a Spanish employee of the Royal Tobacco Factory in Querétaro, and by Ignacia Fonseca, a Spanish woman married to a wool carder. The sorceress, nicknamed La Polla, was known to have the ability "to banish men from their wives and wives from their husbands by means of the art of sorcery." On one occasion La Polla had bragged to Ignacia Fonseca that she had her husband well subdued, despite the fact that he was younger than she, and that she "did whatever she wanted to with him." Another witness in the case, a mulatta married to an *obrajero* or sweatshop worker, testified that her daughter's mother-in-law had become ill, her sales declined, and "everything she bought would rot" after an argument with La Polla. A classic colonial Mexican witch, La Polla was adept in sexual magic, curing, and *maleficium*.

In response to these denunciations, the local commissary of the Inquisition made a trip to the neighborhood of Santa Ana in Querétaro, where La Polla lived, and found that "it is a neighborhood made up of low people [*gente ruin*] and workers of the Royal Tobacco Factory." He questioned two men about La Polla and learned that she ran a liquor stand, from which she sold as well as drank herself, and that she had been living in consensual union with a man until she was denounced to the priest and got married. The commissary questioned no one else, for all the people he came across were "low and unworthy." La Polla herself was finally brought in for examination, and she admitted to being a healer, "like so many other healers who carry out their work among poor people who lack the means to pay for a physician." Further investigation was made into La Polla's life in the course of the next 2 years. Learning that she had taken her Easter communion, the inquisitors in Mexico City instructed, simply, that she be observed carefully and be made to comply with Catholic doctrines. And they asked that, in the future, local authorities not seek information from "vulgar types unworthy of attention" (AGN Inq. 1392, exp. 22). In this manner the case was dismissed.

The lower classes, in other words, were only capable of low ideas, base superstitions, and intervention was pointless. It is worth noting, too, that the declared Spanish racial status of the two main witnesses in the case made no difference to the inquisitors; in their eyes, they were no less low folk than the mulatta witness or the *loba* sorceress. It seems likely that by this period socio-economic position was of greater importance than racial or caste categories in determining a person's status, as John Chance (1978) has pointed out for Oaxaca (cf. Chance and Taylor 1979). A tobacco worker, a carder, a sweatshop employee, or the women connected to them, were, to the elite, all of one class. Although "the people" had not yet developed a class consciousness, the inquisitors had begun to develop one for them.

Earlier in the 18th century, as we have seen, parish priests and local Inquisition authorities were still dutifully sending in confessions and denunciations to Mexico City that the inquisitors themselves often found insignificant. Parish priests played an important intermediary role in the inquisitorial process. Acting from their moral and professional concern with salvation, they compelled penitents to think that the beliefs and actions they confessed to could only be absolved by a higher authority like the Inquisition. Some priests seem to have had much the same image of the Inquisition as the people themselves, based partly on the legacy of *autos de fe*, viewing it as an authority to fear, respect, and reckon with. A gap existed between the expectations of the local authorities and the changing interests of the inquisitors in Mexico City; and it was reinforced by the contradictory cycle of calling for confessions on superstition and witchcraft in the General Edicts of Faith when inquisitors no longer wanted to hear them. By the end of the century the gap had narrowed, and priests and local authorities had begun to pay less and less attention to the witchcraft and magic cases that had seemed so pressingly in need of inquisitorial absolution a few decades before.

A mission friar preaching in the mining town of Zimapan, in Hidalgo, wrote a letter in 1787 to the inquisitors in Mexico City inquiring whether "certain vain observances and superstitions held to by simple and idiotic people were worthy of investigation." These included women's use of a dead person's bones or special powders to attract men, a cure for rashes consisting of having two people form a cross out on a road, and the use of a picture of Death on a piece of tin, placed in a mine to keep the metals flowing. The people who had such "perverse vices" were Indians, mestizos, and mulattoes, and there were probably some Spaniards, too, the friar thought, because among the simple and ignorant folk there had to be some who knew clearly that such things were false—but who did them to "earn a couple of pesos to cover their needs." This friar, at least, had not parted with the idea that Spaniards of any rank had to be clever enough to comprehend the vanity and foolishness of superstition (AGN Inq. 1253, exp. 8). Similarly, the local Inquisition commissary in Zacatecas inquired in 1796 whether he should examine seriously the confessions of *maleficium* that people continued to bring to him; for he had heard "of the little merit accorded these [matters] in the Holy Office" (AGN Inq. 1253, exp. 6).

A consensus was emerging among the clergy, on both local and central levels, about the existence of class cultures. It was no longer possible to conceive of an eventual unity of culture, such as the first evangelizers had sought to impose: the masses—mixed, ignorant, rude—had gone their own way and it was best to pay no heed to their fictions and deceptions, which in any case were basically the vain productions of a poor and pitiable folk.

Heed was to be paid to such matters only if the low folk dared to contaminate the elite with their vices, an attitude given clear expression in a case from Santa Ana Tianguistengo, in Hidalgo, dating from 1786. The case revolves around a long confession written in perfect script by Julian Olivares, apparently a man of some status, whom the parish priest was careful to address as *don*. Olivares recounted how a strange stomach illness that extended down his legs was diagnosed as *maleficium* by two Indian women of the town, whom he went to consult out of desperation. The *maleficium*, they told him, had been done by Juana de la Luz, who was addressed as *doña*, a Spanish woman whom he had once planned to marry. When Juana de la Luz was approached first by Julian Olivares, she disclaimed any responsibility, telling him "to think back, that perhaps some Indian from the Sierra had done him the harm." When Olivares' wife went to see her, she broke into tears, again saying she had done nothing, that word please not reach her husband of this "because he might kill her," and that to regain his health Olivares ought to make a vow to Our Lady of Soxsoquipa.

The inquisitor in Mexico City reacted to the letter with passion, appalled by the fact that a man of the rank of Olivares had allowed himself to be tricked by a couple of Indian women. The parish priest was to let him know, the inquisitor wrote, with what "surprise and displeasure his offensive denunciation had been greeted in this Tribunal, founded only in his foolish credulity and in the despicable prattle of some silly women of the lowliest rank." He and the Indian women were to be scolded separately by the priest and warned to cease spreading such "ridiculous and offensive rumors." Each, indeed, agreed not to speak of these matters again, and there the case closed (AGN Inq. 1267, exp. 11). To survive, this magical culture would have to go underground—the state one finds it in today in Mexico, where matters of witchcraft, sorcery, and the devil, if not the paraphernalia that surrounds them, are shrouded in a secrecy that is rarely made penetrable to the outsider (cf. Favret-Saada 1980).

As the religious elite abandoned the hope of reinforcing orthodoxy across class lines, other historical forces were coming into play, slowly forging changes within the Church and altering the role of the Inquisition in 18th-century Mexico. That the Inquisition was moving on to other concerns was evident already by 1752, when *disloyalty to the crown* figured for the first time in the General Edicts of Faith, which were posted on church doors and read in mass from time to time. This addition was directed not so much at lay folk as at anti-royalist clerics, who were now under obligation, as confessors, to exhort penitents that "disobedience, unfaithfulness, or defamation of the king our lord" were sins (Tambms 1965:177). As the century progressed, the

Inquisition became increasingly secular, developing political interests in combating sedition and the spread of French revolutionary ideology. Thus the Inquisition excommunicated Hidalgo, the priest who led the Independence movement, but by 1810 such efforts had become merely theatrical means of bolstering Spanish rule (Farriss 1968:202–203).

Caught in the rising tide of political and social change that was about to undo the structure of colonial society, the Inquisition abandoned “the people” to their own cosmological resources. Yet regardless of the attitudes of the inquisitors toward popular ideas about attraction, taming, tying, and the power of the Devil, these ideas had acquired a life of their own, becoming part and parcel of the belief system of the new lower classes that were coming into being in Mexico at the end of the colonial period. By the time the inquisitors lost interest in the dialogue with the lay folk, their participation no longer mattered; a popular magical and religious culture had already taken form, which was beyond erasure or redemption.

notes

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¹From 1536 to 1543 the Bishop Zumárraga conducted 19 trials involving around 75 Indian heretics, mainly political and religious leaders of central Mexican communities, a number of whom ended their lives at the stake (Greenleaf 1965:139; Ricard 1966:271–273; Padden 1970:240–274; Lafaye 1976:19–24). The friar Diego de Landa led idolatry trials in the Yucatán during the 1560s, in which torture, whippings, and *autos de fe* figured prominently (Scholes and Roys 1938).

²The “tempo” for this interaction, according to Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, was set less than 100 years after the conquest, between 1614 and 1630, a period of active “acculturation,” by which time the structures of colonial society were in place (1980:264, 271). Inquisition cases from the 17th century have been exhaustively studied by him as well as by Alberro (1981a), while Greenleaf (1969) has covered the 16th century. In contrast, the late-colonial period of the Inquisition has been relatively unstudied.

³Alberro (1981a) has shown in her analysis of the 11,441 Inquisition records for Mexico from 1571 to 1700 that the largest number (42 percent) involved “religious crimes”—blasphemy, impersonating a priest, simony, and so on. Next came “sexual crimes,” mainly bigamy and solicitations by priests (18 percent); then witchcraft, superstition, and devil pacts (17 percent); heresies, mainly Judaism and Protestantism (13 percent); and miscellaneous civil crimes (8 percent). At the bottom of the list came idolatry (0.7 percent) and “tendencies,” such as Erasmianism (0.4 percent). There were no great changes in these percentages during the following century. A tally of 287 cases from the 1770s yielded the following figures: religious crimes, 36 percent; sexual crimes, 44 percent; witchcraft and so on, 13 percent; civil crimes, 4 percent; all other categories, 1 percent or less. The most significant difference was that the percentage of sexual crimes, still evenly divided between bigamy and solicitation cases, had doubled. I will analyze the statistics of the 18th-century Inquisition more fully in a future study.

The distribution of cases that reached the Inquisition in Spain was quite different. In Castile, of 16,441 cases from the 16th and 17th centuries classified by Henningsen (1977), the greatest segment (43 percent) concerned heretics (Jews, Moors, and Lutherans). Religious crimes were next with 40 percent; sexual crimes comprised only 7 percent of the total; and witchcraft and superstitions made up less than 5 percent.

⁴Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico) Ramo de Inquisición (hereafter AGN Inq.) 765, exp. 10. Beginning with this case, the document source is given at the end of each example.

⁵Of the various types of sexual magic for which men and women came before the Inquisition, the most common was the magic of attraction, which accounted for three-quarters of the cases involving men and almost half of those involving women. Another third of the women were accused of using the magic of “tying” or “taming.” Other uses of magic and witchcraft in the sexual realm included: being able to live freely with one’s mistress; keeping one’s lover from leaving; keeping watch over one’s spouse; and being a dealer in love magic.

⁶On the process of internalizing Edicts of Faith, see the case study of Aufderheide (1973:225).

⁷Such “tyings” are still used today in much of Latin America (cf. Taussig 1980:100).

⁸Over the course of the 18th century, men were denounced, or denounced themselves, for invoking or signing a pact with the devil about six times as often as women (127 versus 20 cases). Women, on the other hand, came before the Inquisition almost three times as often as men for witchcraft, sorcery, or *maleficium* (*brujería*, *hechicería*, *maleficio*—interchangeable words in the Inquisition’s vocabulary), with 224 cases as against 79 for men. With the other category of cases examined in this paper, those involving superstition, men and women were about even, with 308 and 339 cases respectively.

⁹AGN Inq. 911, ff. 334–376. María Rosa was kept under surveillance in a village house for 2 years while her case was being tried, until she escaped to Guanajuato. She died in 1751.

¹⁰AGN Inq. 812, no. 19. All the proceedings in the case of Juana de Santos were sent to the Holy Office in Mexico City for a final decision, which was either never made or never sent back to Tepic.

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