

## INSTANCES OF MAYA WITCHCRAFT IN THE 18TH CENTURY TOTONICAPAN AREA

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### *Introduction*

Of all subjects in Maya culture and all periods of its history, none is less well known than the world-view of Maya people during the Colonial period. The methodological problem is formidable. How can one discover the beliefs, the world view of this largely non-literate people? To what documents can one turn for information on such a subject? The major Colonial chronicles are of some help in this regard as are the Spanish-Maya dictionaries of the period. Yet, with few exceptions, we are able to collect only scraps of information and, more importantly, even these are the results of interpretations made by individuals of European culture.<sup>1</sup> Is there any way to get more or less direct statements of Maya people themselves during this period?

Fortunately, the answer is a qualified "yes". During the Colonial period there was an arena in which Maya people made statements which were recorded, either verbatim in their own language or as translations into Spanish. This arena was the Spanish legal system and the documents are the records of its proceedings, documents of conflict between individual litigants or groups, or between Maya people and the Spanish regime.<sup>2</sup> It is in this type of document that individuals' statements are preserved in the form of complaints, accusations, arguments, counter-arguments and conflicting justifications. It is, therefore, to this type of document

<sup>1</sup> The problem of Spaniards imposing their own interpretations on aspects of native culture is dealt with by Maurer (1978) and Monaghan (N.D.).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed treatment concerning such documents of conflict and their place in Mesoamerican ethnohistory see Hill (in press).

that we must turn in any attempt to reconstruct Colonial Maya world view.

At the same time, however, we must recognize that not every aspect of world view can be reconstructed in this way. The legal documents only record cases which, for some reason, came to the attention of Spanish authorities and, of course, the Spaniards were concerned with resolving disputes and punishing wrongdoers, not with collecting ethnographic data. Therefore, even here we are at a considerable distance from our potential informants. They speak to us only on certain topics and in response to questions asked by others, with interests very different from ours.

As an example of what can be achieved through the analysis of such legal records, and hopefully as a worthwhile contribution to our knowledge of the Maya as well, the present paper will describe at least some beliefs and practices known generically in anthropology as witchcraft as they were recorded in the 18th century Totonicapán area of the western Guatemala highlands. This will provide a basis for comparison with beliefs recorded ethnographically, which in turn may suggest either regional differences in such beliefs among the Maya and/or cultural change. In addition to basic beliefs and practices, it will also be possible to describe some social usages of such beliefs. In one case we shall see what most of the Maya participants believed to be illness caused by witchcraft and the attempted cure. In another we shall see how witchcraft beliefs could be manipulated by a community's leadership for their own purposes.

### *Documentary Background*

The documents on which this study is based were produced as parts of criminal investigations made by Spanish officials of the *Alcaldía Mayor* of Totonicapán. They were prompted by the possibility of murder or illegal violence in which witchcraft was either suspected or involved as an issue. Yet, as we shall see, the Spanish officials of this period were strongly skeptical of witchcraft and much more inclined to seek "rational" causes for events and to impose sentences accordingly.

Both documents are filed under the section of *Actuaciones Civiles y Criminales* of the Archivo de Centro América in Guatemala. They are the most complete and detailed of only a handful of such cases in the 18th century, the only period between the



16th and 19th centuries for which any such cases are recorded.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, documentation began when some complain was registered with an official of the *alcaldía mayor*. Typically, an official would be assigned to conduct an investigation in which all steps were fairly meticulously recorded. Statements were taken from individuals concerned or with knowledge of the case, the scenes of events were sometimes visited, and efforts were made to find and evaluate physical evidence. Statements were also made by the accused parties who at some point also had benefit of appointed Spanish counsel (*defensores*), though in the two present cases these appointments were made very late in the proceedings. In the earlier case, the presiding Spanish official also determined the guilt of the accused and their punishment. By mid-century, however, procedures had evidently changed such that the case records were sent to the capital of the *audiencia* where a decision was made.

Despite their potential, both documents have limitations as sources. First among these is the fact that all statements were taken significantly after the events themselves took place. This time lag ranged from a few days to several weeks. In that time, witnesses, who did not take or make notes, could be expected to forget some details and embellish others. This, in fact, appears to have been the case. The limitation is countered, however, by the number of statements taken. By comparing the various statements it is possible to weigh the evidence of the different witnesses and derive a fairly clear picture of the events associated with each case. There is also the fact that while all statements were made by Maya people in their own language (in this area, Quiché), they were all translated into Spanish. While translators were often official or at least semi-official, and therefore presumably at least moderately capable, it is impossible to assess precisely the relative skill of the translator or his familiarity with the languages in question. Another at least potential problem is that witnesses may have been unwilling to divulge too much information, particularly on the topic of witchcraft, for fear of reprisal from either their

<sup>3</sup> Of the three other such cases which the author has been able to locate one, for Comalapa is a short, simple denial of any wrongdoing which contains no description (A1.15, Leg. 5398, Exp. 45903). Another, for Mixco, concerns the possible poisoning of a local Indian man by his jilted mistress (A1.15, Leg. 2930, Exp. 27492). The final one, for Jalapa, involves highly ladinoized Indians in eastern Guatemala and is thus of limited potential for the present study (A1.15, Leg. 5440, Exp. 46582).



own people or the Spaniards. After all, one who knows too much about witchcraft may in fact be a witch! However, given the level of detail presented in the various statements, this does not seem to be too great a problem. Finally, and annoyingly for the analyst, neither the witnesses nor the presiding Spanish officials had much concern with reconstructing a precise chronology of dates or even events. This is surprising given that the Spaniards' aim was to determine guilt or innocence and that this might well rest on a question of "who did what, when?" This is a less crucial issue for the present analysis, however, since we are not concerned with guilt or innocence but with the beliefs and practices reflected in the statements. Still, the actual sequence of events in curing procedures or torture sessions is at times confusing, though this is a relatively minor point that does not threaten the validity of the data.

In sum, the documents have their limitations. Yet, these can be accounted for, and in the present instance, they are more than outweighed by their richness and detail. These factors make the use of the documents both fascinating and legitimate.

### *The Death of Martín García Belesuy*

The Spanish authorities first became aware of this affair on March 10, 1715, when the Indian *justicias* of San Miguel Totonicapán presented a deathbed statement made by Martín García Belesuy, an Indian, in which he stated that he was the victim of witchcraft directed against him by another Indian, Bartolomé Tíu.<sup>4</sup> The statement also recorded the victim's efforts to find cures. The recipient of this document, Teniente de Alcalde Mayor Alepo de Estrada, promptly prepared to investigate the charges, ordering the apprehension and jailing of Tíu and of one individual who attempted a cure, Diego Hernandez Cot and that all parties with knowledge of the case appear before him. An Indian interpreter was also named to manage the language differences between the Spanish official and the Maya witnesses. In addition to the deathbed accusation, statements were made by Martín's widow, Catalina Escaquic, his brother, Antonio, and a friend Tomás Lopez Quonon. Statements (technically termed *confesiones* in Spanish) were also made by both Tíu and Cot as the

<sup>4</sup> A1.15 Leg. 3024 Exp. 29175.



accused parties. While differing in many details, the statements of Martín García Belesuy and the other witnesses agreed on the broad features of the case.

The trouble began while Martín was visiting the house of Bartolomé Tíu. The visit was a semi-official one by the past leaders (*alcaldes pasados*) of the Cofradía de las Ánimas.<sup>5</sup> Tíu was evidently charged with leading the *cofradía* that year and was either being formally invested or simply entertaining the *alcaldes pasados* and receiving advice as to how to fulfill his obligations. In any event, chocolate was served by Tíu. Upon drinking his, Martín found three maggots in his cup. Martín said nothing at the time, but several days later he suffered an intestinal hemorrhage or bloody diarrhea (*ebacuación de sangre*).

As a result, Martín was considerably debilitated and suspected his illness had been intentionally caused by the chocolate he had drunk. Accordingly, Martín sent his brother Antonio to plead with Tíu that he cure Martín. Tíu must have had some knowledge of some kinds of procedures since he said he would go to Martín to cure him but at the same time he felt offended for being accused of intentionally putting the maggots in the chocolate. Indeed, Tíu later maintained in his own statement that the maggots had accidentally fallen into the cup, which had been placed in the kitchen prior to serving beneath some meat that had been hanging there. Still, Tíu came to Martín's house and gave him a drink made from 25 burned and finely ground *cacaos* mixed with *pinol* (corn gruel). This concoction had some limited effect, stopping the bleeding for two days.

As the cure was only temporary, Martín contacted another individual to treat him. This was Antonio Socop (deceased at the time of the investigation), who had a reputation as a curer and as an enemy of Bartolomé Tíu. Martín sent meat to Socop five times along with his requests for a cure before the latter finally agreed to try. First, however, Socop said he must go to the church to burn candles before the image of Our Lady and ask permission (*pedir licencia*) to cure from Santísimo Sacramento and Las Benditas Animas. The visit was made about four in the morning.

<sup>5</sup> A *cofradía* is a type of religious sodality introduced by the Spaniards. Typically a group of men is selected on a yearly, rotating basis to insure that the saint or other supernatural of the *cofradía's* devotion is cared for and the appropriate fiesta is celebrated. Usually the men are called *mayordomos*. In this area, however, the term *alcaldes*. Usually restricted to certain civil officials, was applied instead. For the Colonial period see Hill (N.D.).



Socop being accompanied by Martín's brother Antonio as Martín could not make the trip himself. Yet they did not accomplish their goals as Antonio later related. After entering the church, and despite locking the door behind them, there appeared in the doorway the figure of someone who they could not make out. The figure broke wind loudly before them, then disappeared. Antonio and Socop then found that the candles they tried to light would not burn. Experiencing all this, they returned to Martín's house where Socop told him that the witchcraft was too strong for him to cure.

After a few days, Tíu came again to Martín's house to treat him. They both entered the sweat bath (*temascal*) and later Tíu bled Martín, using special lancets on Martín's head. Rather than improving, however, Martín's condition worsened to the extent he could no longer mount a horse, as he had formerly been able to do. Tíu attempted to deflect accusations of wrongdoing and claimed that someone had previously stolen the lancets from the altar in his house where they were kept prior to their use on Martín. One lancet was later discovered in a tree, another was found by one of the town's Indian *alcaldes*, Pascual Pérez Chuy, who returned it to Tíu. The third was never recovered. Tíu suspected that Socop had stolen the lancets and treated them in some way so that they would harm rather than cure. Tíu swore to take revenge and, indeed, Socop later died of unstated causes without having received the last rites.

Several days after Tíu's visit, Antonio was sent for another curer, recommended by an acquaintance, Antonio Racpop. The curer was Diego Hernandez Cot. Cot agreed to attempt a cure of Martín and applied several treatments. These will be considered in detail as they constitute a unique description of such practices in the region during the Colonial period.

Cot's procedures were basically shamanistic and involved the widespread naive American practice of extracting intrusive foreign objects from the patient's body. Prior to the extractions, however, Cot held a brief consultation with his patient. He asked if Martín had eaten or drunk anything which might have made him sick and if he had any enemies. Martín told him about Tíu and the chocolate. Cot said he wanted to cure Martín, but that he was somewhat afraid to make the attempt because of an experience he just recently had. Cot told Martín that, while he was at the house of Martín's other brother, Domingo, a dog had soiled his



chair and that the excrement seemed to have the shape of a face with eyes and ears. Cot thought that it might be Tíu. One assumes Cot was afraid that if Tíu could manifest himself in an animal's excrement he had very great powers and would know that Cot was attempting a cure. Presumably, this knowledge on the part of the suspected witch either jeopardized the cure, the curer, or both. Still, Cot decided to proceed with the cure and asked for two *reales* to buy olive oil (*aceite*) for Martín to drink. This treatment served as a diagnostic device, Cot advising Martín and his family that they must observe the contents of the patient's next bowel movement. The oil evidently worked quickly and Cot determined that the movement contained some sort of toad secretions (*mojo de sapo*), and ordered them to get garlic, chile and *tabaco bobo* which he would use in extracting the toad itself.

The ingredients were placed in a small gourd (*jicara*) which was placed against Martín's stomach as one would a cupping glass (*ventosa*) for bleeding. But Cot did not cut into him in any way. He simply withdrew the *jicara* and removed a small toad from it which he ordered burned. Cot then lifted his face upward towards the loft of the house and addressed Tíu (who was not present), asking why he had made this poor man so sick. If he were doing it for money or some other thing, he had only to ask and it would be given him.

The treatment then continued, Cot applying the *jicara* to various parts of Martín's body and extracting other intrusive objects. During the process Cot repeatedly incanted to Martín, "Tíu is your enemy and has put thirteen things in you, but I will get them out". The different statements are not entirely in agreement on what was extracted where, and not all of the witnesses were present for the entire curing process.

Still, as best as can be reconstructed, the *jicara* was applied to the patient's head from which some strands of corn silk were extracted. One ear yielded one or two beetles (*ronrones*) and two lengths of cord, while from the other ear came a tadpole (*atepocate*). Antonio and Catalina also stated that more corn silk, a fly, and four lengths of cord were taken from two places on the chest and that some substance like the sediment of *chicha* was taken from Martín's breast. Thus, the thirteen things supposedly put by Tíu into Martín's body would seem to be one toad, one fly, one tadpole, two beetles, six lengths of cord, the *chicha* sediment, and the corn silk. Antonio could not believe Cot was



actually extracting these things and so gave him another, empty *jícara*. Unphased, Cot returned to his work with the new *jícara* and continued to extract the sediment-like material.

All of the extracted materials were burned with the exception of the tadpole. According to another witness, Thomás Lopez Quonon, who had been in another room burning candles, Cot was seated at a table playing with it when he came into the room. Cot invited him to look at what he had extracted from Martín, whose illness Cot again declared to have been caused by Tíu. Cot again turned his face upward and addressed Tíu as he had before. Just afterwards, the tadpole jumped from the table and disappeared. Cot explained it had gone back to its master (*amo*), Tíu.

Despite the treatment, Martín's condition did not improve. Believing himself to be on his deathbed, he called the Indian officials of the town to hear and record his accusation of Tíu. The statement was made on March 1, 1715 and was presented to the Spanish authorities nine days later. In the interim Martín died, though the exact date of his death was not recorded by the Indian *justicias* or solicited by the Spanish official investigating the case.

As noted above, the charges were taken seriously by the Spanish authorities, especially as a death (possibly murder) was involved. Both Tíu and Cot were apprehended and remained in jail for the length of the investigation. Tíu flatly denied the specific charge of witchcraft and any wrongdoing or even malice towards Martín, though he freely admitted his attempts to cure him. He attributed Martín's death, however, to dysentery. Cot also freely admitted his treatments for Martín. The two prisoners were made formally to confront each other (*careamiento*) on March 16. Here the Spaniard's skepticism about the witchcraft charges is made evident. Teniente Estrada evidently believed Tíu and Cot had somehow collaborated and pointedly asked if Tíu had not been in the loft of Martín's house during Cot's attempted cure and if this were not the reason for Cot's turning his face upward when he addressed Tíu on that occasion. Tíu denied being there personally, as he was away at his milpa at the time. He also denied using any form of witchcraft to be there in some other form. Cot denied having any knowledge of Tíu's presence. He said he addressed himself to Tíu and in the direction of the loft only because Martín had named Tíu as his enemy and because during the cure Martín heard a noise in the loft like a large stone falling, which he believed to be Tíu.



Teniente Estrada was clearly not satisfied by these answers, but had no hard evidence for the murder charge. On the other hand, both Cot and Tiu had freely confessed their attempts to cure Martín, so he convicted them of practices harmful to the service of Our Lord God (*dañosos al servicio de Dios nuestro Señor*). He summarily sentenced Cot and Tiu to be placed on mules and publicly paraded through the town, with a trumpeter to call the people and a crier to tell of their offense. The two were also to be given 50 lashes each. Their appointed *defensor*, Spaniard Alferez Francisco Manuel de Arriola, meekly acquiesced to his clients' punishment, declining even the formality of an appeal and the case was apparently not, therefore, reviewed by the *Audiencia* in the capital.

The most interesting topic for analysis from this case involves the comparison of the recorded witchcraft beliefs, practices and cures with those known ethnographically for the region. Both similarities and differences are striking, the latter suggesting a re-evaluation of the ethnographically-recorded practices' traditional status.

The most striking divergence between the practices recorded in the early 18th century and those known from mid-20th century ethnography is the almost total absence in the former period of divination as a diagnostic procedure. This is a nearly universal feature of curing in the Maya highlands where practices may range from pulsing, to the simple casting of lots, to complex manipulations involving the divinatory calendar.<sup>6</sup> Such procedures are used to distinguish between soul-loss and witchcraft and, in the latter case, to identify the person causing the illness. In the 18th century case, the patient's word regarding the nature of his disease and the sender was enough. The only possible divinatory practice was related by Martín's wife who claimed that Cot broke an egg into a gourd, along with other items, prior to removing the foreign objects from his patient. Such use of an egg in a gourd as a divinatory device is recorded only among the Chortí of eastern Guatemala, where it is a rare and poorly understood alternative to pulsing.<sup>7</sup> Even in the present instance, however, the immediacy of the gourd's application to curing suggests that the egg may have been used somehow to aid the withdrawal of foreign objects rather

<sup>6</sup> For ethnographic treatments of witchcraft and divination see Wisdom 1940, Bunzel 1952, Holland 1963, Reina 1965, Vogt 1969, Nash 1970, Colby and Colby 1981, and Tedlock 1982.

<sup>7</sup> See Wisdom 1940:344.



than divination, as seems to be the case in Amatenango, Chiapas.<sup>8</sup> The use of an egg in a gourd might alternatively be in some way related to the Mam practices of passing an egg over a patient's body to draw a foreign object into it and later breaking the egg to see what had been removed.<sup>9</sup> Yet the very fact of this confusion as to the significance of the egg indicates how far one must push the analysis to find evidence of divinatory practices so common today.

In addition to the absence of divination, another significant contrast is the use of oil as a laxative so that the patient's feces could be examined. Such procedures seem completely unknown ethnographically. Still, it is important to note that the aim of the analysis was to determine what kind of creature(s) had been magically placed in the victim (diagnosed as a toad due to the secretions of such an animal supposedly contained in the movement).

A number of striking contrasts are also evident in terms of the actual curing techniques. Nearly universally, cures, as recorded ethnographically, require visits to shrines or other sacred places away from town, where candles and/or incense are burned and prayers made to the Earth Lord or his local equivalent.<sup>10</sup> The only suggestion of any similar practice is contained as an aside in Quonon's statement in which he said he had been burning candles in another room while Cot was curing Martín. Unfortunately, this tantalizingly brief statement does not indicate what Quonon's qualifications were for this role, nor the reason for burning the candles. Instead, Cot's cures apparently relied solely on extraction of the foreign objects from the patient's body, a technique again only recorded for the Chortí as "pulling" and the Tzeltal of Amatenango.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the beliefs and practices described in the case are not totally divergent from those of this century. Certainly the cause of the illness through ingestion of a drink with something maliciously placed in it is a widespread belief, as is the concept that the substance can cause still other things to grow inside the victim.<sup>12</sup> The items themselves are also in complete accord

<sup>8</sup> See Nash 1970:148.

<sup>9</sup> See Wagley 1949:78.

<sup>10</sup> For curing procedures see especially Wagley 1940, Bunzel 1952, Holland 1963, Reina 1965, and Vogt 1969.

<sup>11</sup> See Wisdom 1940:350-351, Nash 1970:148.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Reina 1965:274 and Vogt 1969:408-409.



with the ethnographic record.<sup>13</sup> There are, in addition, some suggestions that the power to transform was ascribed to Tíu, as it is to witches today.<sup>14</sup> The figure appearing as if by magic in the church to spoil Socop's attempt to request permission to cure, and the visage-like appearance of the dog excrement in Cot's chair can both be interpreted in this way. Finally, the tadpole which disappeared, as Cot said, to return to its master, seems to conform to a belief recorded for Zinacantán that witches can send spies to observe attempted cures.<sup>15</sup>

When compared to the ethnographic record of the area, it becomes evident that Tíu utilized only what might be termed "practical" cures from a Maya standpoint. The concoction to treat Martín's dysentery might be simply one of many plant-based cures used by the Maya for many different symptoms. The sweatbath is another near universal cure-all among the highland Maya. Bleeding is still another practical technique, though recorded ethnographically only for the Chortí and Tzeltal of Amatenango.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to speculate that if Tíu actually did undertake to harm Martín magically, then, by Maya logic, the cures he used could not possibly help (as was in fact the case). On the other hand, the use of purely practical cures by Tíu could have been made part of his defense when confronted by the Spanish authorities. Tíu stated he believed Martín died of dysentery, and his attempted cures were, from a Maya standpoint, logical steps to deal with the symptoms. Thus, the question of Tíu's guilt or innocence remains unanswerable, though this is of only incidental importance. Tíu's use of just practical cures (along with their lack of effect) may also explain Martín's efforts to enlist others to deal with an illness he believed to be caused by witchcraft.

The case just described indicates that witches, witchcraft and magical cures were a prominent component of highland Maya world view in the early 18th century. Minimally, individuals sincerely believed that disease and even death could be caused through such techniques and that they could be combatted using appro-

<sup>13</sup> Vogt (1969:409) and Holland (1963:142) mention worms and substances which can cause balls of string and lizards to grow in a victim's stomach. Wisdom (1940:332) lists forgs, snakes, worms, flies, maggots, "and avrious stickly and slimy substances".

<sup>14</sup> Vogt (1969:410-411) specifically mentions the belief in transformation.

<sup>15</sup> Vogt (1969:410) mentions the belief in such spying.

<sup>16</sup> See Wisdom 1940:356-357, Nash 1970:148. In Amatenango, however, bleeding also has a diagnostic function and is conceived of as "drawing out evil".



priate countermeasures at the hands of specialists. Yet, as we shall see in the next case, a degree of skepticism was also present which allowed the cold-blooded use of witch accusations and fear to achieve what seems to have been at least revenge and at most a reaffirmation of local political dominance.

### *Witchcraft Conspiracy*

This case came to Spanish attention on January 29, 1750, when two *mayores* and ten *alguaciles* from San Cristóbal Totonicapán brought five badly mauled prisoners to Don Miguel Antonio de Ríos, Teniente de Alcalde Mayor of Totonicapán, in his offices in San Miguel.<sup>17</sup> The Indian officials also brought papers written in Spanish from the *Justicias* of the town which accused the prisoners of witchcraft. Ríos noted immediately that the prisoners' battered condition was the result of torture, and undertook to investigate both the witchcraft accusations and the unauthorized use of torture by Indian officials. In the interim, the five accused men would wait in jail.

The next day, Ríos arrived at San Cristóbal, accompanied by two assistants and an interpreter. The first step in the investigation was to take statements from various witnesses and participants in the events prior to the five accused men's delivery to San Miguel. In all, 19 such statements were taken, including three from Spaniards, four from "*ladinos*" (Hispanicised Indians), and 12 from Indians of San Cristóbal, San Francisco el Alto, and San Andrés Xecul. Four of the five accused also made statements (*confesiones*), though the fifth died of his torture-inflicted wounds in jail before his statement could be officially registered.

The statements varied widely in content, making synthesis difficult. Most witnesses were not present for the entire period of local action against the accused witches. Others, as we shall see, had their own reasons for obscuring the events or even perjuring themselves. The document is also difficult to work with since the statements of those with the least knowledge of the case were taken first, while those of the defendants were taken last. In deference to their caste, the Spaniards and *ladinos* were interviewed first. One of the Spaniards and two of the *ladinos* were residents in San Cristóbal, the others were from Salcajá. All had been called

<sup>17</sup> A1.15 Leg. 2896 Exp. 26762. (Ibid.: 148).



on January 24 by the Indian *Governador* of San Cristóbal to witnesses the proceedings against the accused witches once they were in local custody. Other witnesses had also been specifically summoned by the *Governador* or claimed to have been present at certain times. As a result, statements vary in terms of content and, since no attempt was made by the investigating Spanish official to control for chronology, precise structuring of the sequence of events is very difficult. Still, the resulting synthesis contains few ambiguities, apart from those associated with the translation of the Maya people's statements to Spanish in the formal legal context of the investigation.

In order to understand what happened and the significance of many statements, it is crucial to know at the outset that there was no witchcraft conspiracy at all. The Spanish investigation clearly demonstrated that all of the charges and the limited physical evidence were the creations of a group of the town's *principales*, directed against the choir master and schoolmaster Francisco Ax and the musicians (many related) of the church. Though never explicitly stated, it is obvious that there was some history of conflict between the *principales* and the choir master, since on a previous occasion they had petitioned (the town's priest?) for his removal. However, this action had no effect. When some of the *principales'* children were later physically punished by Ax in his capacity of *maestro de escuela*, the witchcraft charges were dreamt up.

However, this was no crude attempt to frame the choir master, his relatives, and associates. Indeed, the *principales* displayed considerable skill in their timing of the accusations and their content so, as to control public opinion and neutralize the local authorities. With these impediments removed, they were able to demand the torture of the defendants (ostensibly in order to determine the extent of the witchcraft conspiracy) and thus enjoy their revenge without, they correctly believed, any liability on their part.

As was surely planned in advance, the first evidence of witchcraft was "discovered" by one of the *principales*. Yet the discovery itself had been skillfully timed to coincide with an epidemic which was currently claiming many victims. Given Maya beliefs that disease is magically caused, the town's population must already have been in the throes of witch-fear. The *principales* simply capitalized on this in such a way that their charges would be easily believed and that immediate local action would be demanded.



The first "clues" to the existence of a witchcraft conspiracy were found by Pedro Mantánico. He claimed that on the day after the *fiesta* of San Sebastián he was passing by the chapel of that saint (in the *barrio* of the same name) and found many people there with lighted candles exiting the chapel. Pedro went at the base of the cross in the patio supposedly motivated by his curiosity about all the people gathered around it. (Other witnesses, however, stated just the reverse, that it was Pedro who attracted a crowd at the base of the cross). Everyone was asking who had died because water had been poured out (evidently it was customary for the dead to be washed in this patio). The water had eroded some earth and exposed a hole. Pedro and others began to excavate but he claimed were told to stop by María San. She reportedly told them that a baby of hers who died without baptism was buried there at the base of the cross. Yet Pedro later claimed that some bone fragments containing teeth had already been discovered, so he "knew" María was lying. Pedro then seems to have gotten the crowd to believe there might be bones buried under other crosses and shrines in town, and a frantic search began. The crowd went first (at Pedro's suggestion?) to the *hermita* of San Sebastián. Pedro later claimed that, by the time he arrived, he could hardly enter due to all the holes the crowd had dug. One of the holes dug by Antonio Sioc (later deceased) contained more bones, old and broken. The crowd (again presumably at Pedro's instigation) called for María San to see if she would claim these bones as those of a baby as well. She did not come, but her husband, Christóbal Mexía, allegedly did. He reportedly had words with Sioc, demanding to know why his wife was being bothered. That afternoon, Pedro, now joined by his brother Miguel, took the bones to the *governador* along with the story behind their discovery.

*Governador* Andres Cité was 90 years old at the time, and clearly in no way disposed to put himself in charge of any investigation. Still, the *governador* had María San and Christóbal Mexía brought to him. Mexía asked Cité why they were being made prisoners and was told that all the *maestros de coro* were witches, and that he had testimony to that effect. Mexía, not being a member of the *coro*, denied any knowledge of the affair and stated that his wife could not have impeded the discovery of the bones as claimed by Pedro Montánico, since she had been at home with him and their son-in-law, Andrés Ax, until summoned by the *governador*. Fortunately for the *governador*, bad news travels



fast and the first *alcalde* of nearby San Andrés Xecul had already heard the rumor that bones (supposedly buried by *brujos*) had been found in San Cristóbal. *Alcalde* Francisco Morales went to find out the details from *gobernador* Cité. The *gobernador* lamented that he knew nothing as yet, since there were no confessions. Cité confided that he was afraid he would be accused of covering up a conspiracy or not punishing witches severely enough if they were of his own *pueblo*. He therefore asked the *alcalde* from Xecul to undertake the investigation and empowered him (illegally) to do whatever would be necessary to discover the truth.

On the next day, January 25, *alcalde* Morales began his investigation. Also present were the *alcaldes* of San Francisco el Alto, the second *alcalde* of Xecul and a huge crowd of local people. At this point, another part of the *principales'* plan was put in action. One of their number, Baltasar Simag, appeared with knowledge of what he claimed was a deathbed statement made to him by his deceased nephew, Pedro. Baltasar claimed that the statement had been made on the morning of the 24th, before the discovery of the bones. Baltasar had been afraid to tell anyone, however, and was only coming forward because Pedro Mantanico's discovery of the bones brought the matter to light.

According to Baltasar, his nephew Pedro had confessed that one night he had been passing the *iglesia mayor* of the *pueblo* when he saw three figures in its patio. He watched and found them to be Tomás, Nicolás, Francisco and Andrés Ax, Ramón Chay, Diego Sochó and some other individuals he did not know. They were exvacating bones from beside the steps at the door. When discovered by Pedro, they allegedly begged him not to tell the priest, to which he agreed after being given two *pesos* and a drink of *aguardiente*. Pedro supposedly said he also knew that they had buried bones under the cross and in the *hermita* of San Sebastián, as well as somewhere along the road to San Francisco el Alto. Baltasar claimed Pedro confessed this to that, before his death, the authorities could be advised that this was the cause of the plague, and that his own death was caused by Tomás Ax.

This statement provided the starting point for the investigation and *alcalde* Morales had Andrés Ax brought before him. Andrés was a *cantór* of the *iglesia* and the son-in-law of María San and Christóbal Mexía. He was first questioned concerning what he knew about the conspiracy. He denied any knowledge of it. Accordingly, he was taken back to the *hermita* of San Sebastián to



see the excavations, and was forced to carry back more bones wrapped in his *capote* and hung from his neck with a rope. Andrés still denied the charges and was therefore hung up naked and given between two and five dozen lashes (according to different statements). Andrés later told the Spanish authorities that he only confessed then out of fear of further punishment and simply said what the *principales* told him to say, including implicating others. These were Ramón Chay (presumably another *cantor*) and Andrés Petz, the *sacristan* of the church. Chay was questioned first, and after four dozen lashes, confessed to the truth of Simag's statement and implicated Andrés Ax and Diego Sochó, a *cantor* and *cofradía* scribe. Petz also suffered two dozen lashes, but denied the charges and remained otherwise silent. Similar methods resulted in the implication of other men. Sochó implicated *maestro de coro* Francisco Ax, after four dozen lashes. Francisco's son Nicolás Ax (a weaver) received the same treatment and named his uncle Tomás and his father.

In addition to forcing the prisoners to identify others as co-conspirators as directed by the *principales*, whippings were also to compel the accused to recount a cabalistic episode, also concocted by the *principales* who coached the prisoners, replete with nightmare symbols which would help fix their guilt even more firmly in the minds of the other townspeople. As the story was remembered by the witnesses, the accused were accustomed to meeting in the house of Tomás Ax, along with one Juan or Miguel Soc, who allegedly came every 20 days from San Miguel Totonicapán and who received 2 pesos in payment for each visit. This Soc was purportedly the *maestro* of the group and had several items which he used. These included: a book, bound in black, with writing in both black and red; a rock crystal in which he "discovered" the time they were to go out through the town; and a little gourd containing powders with strange powers. Before their supposed nocturnal jaunts, three of the group (Nicolás Ax, Andrés Ax, and Diego Sochó) were ordered by Soc to lie face down on the floor of the house. Then, Soc and Francisco Ax jumped over them. After this, they were sprinkled with some powder. Upon rising they found themselves in tunics and that their feet no longer touched the ground, but were floating in a circle. A drum (*tambor*) appeared from nowhere and was tossed among the participants. Thus floating, they supposedly went through the town, able to cover long distances (more than 15 town blocks at one point)



in the blinking of an eye. In this way, the conspirators were supposedly able to move about the town undetected, and could place the bones of the dead beneath crosses, shrines, and house foundations in order to cause still more deaths.

The vain search for this paraphernalia allowed additional torture to be inflicted on the *principales* victims. After his initial confession, Ramón Chay was again brought out. He was asked where the tunics and drum were and claimed Diego Sochó had them. Sochó was brought out and, in Chay's presence, claimed the latter had them. Chay was next thrown on a table and tied down. Ocote wood was brought and a fire made. Over the fire, raw sugar was melted and, along with the melting sap of the ocote, applied to the wounds left by the four dozen lashes Chay had already received. He told his tormentors that the tunics and drum were hidden under a rock along the road to San Carlos Sija. Yet a search failed to produce anything (How could it, since the entire story was fabricated?) and Chay was questioned again after suffering more lashes (between two and five dozen). Once he said they were in the loft of his house, but were not found there. Finally after once again suffering the molten sugar treatment, he "confessed" that their own shirts served as tunics, after being magically lengthened after the application of Soc's powders.

Francisco Ax was next. Having been identified as a *maestro* of the group along with Soc, he was asked where the book was. He maintained his innocence and ignorance of the entire matter but was confronted by the other prisoners who, surely fearful of receiving the same treatment as Ramón Chay, claimed in his presence that he did have the book. Francisco still denied it and was given the same molten sugar and sap treatment as Chay. In order to save himself, Francisco claimed that the book was in a box in Tomás Ax's house. Yet an examination of the box's contents yielded only one tattered piece of paper. Francisco told his captors that this was all that was left of the book. However, he was again contradicted by the other prisoners who said that the book was bounl an the piece of papel was not from it. After additional torture (mercifully not specified), Francisco next said that the book had been burned, and, finally, after still more, that Soc still had it, though Ramón Chay swore (as he would have to anything at this point) that he had seen the book in Francisco's house the month before.

Had there been any truth to the accusations, the *principales*



probably could have kept *alcalde* Morales torturing the prisoners until they died. Indeed, during the course of the Spanish investigation, Ramón Chay did die of his wounds. But the *principales* had evidently had their revenge as the torture sessions suddenly stop, without ever having produced a piece of physical evidence apart from the bones. A few days later, the prisoners were sent under guard to Totonicapán, where Teniente de Alcalde Mayor Ríos was first notified of the case.

In addition to recording witnesses' statements, Ríos also viewed the bones which had been discovered and confirmed that they were old and quite broken, but definitely human. In a vain attempt to recover some additional physical evidence, Ríos also had the accused men's houses searched and an inventory made of their possessions.

Due to what he felt to be much more pressing business, such as the collection of tribute, Ríos did not take statements (*confesiones*) from the four surviving prisoners until July 22, 1750. Andrés, Nicolás, and Francisco Ax, and Diego Sochó were all asked the same sequence of questions. What were their names, ages, civil status, place of residence, and jobs? Did they know why they were imprisoned? How, given the statements against them, could they deny the charges? All four knew they were in prison because of charges brought against them by the *principales* of the town. Francisco and Andrés Ax also informed Ríos of the enmity the *principales* had for them (though unfortunately not the full cause). All four also repudiated their confessions made before the local authorities, stating they had done so only out of fear of further torture and that they had been told what they must say by the *principales* in order to save themselves.

On July 25, the prisoners were officially charged (*cargo de culpa*) with having disinterred human remains from holy ground and, with them, having practiced certain ceremonies at night which frightened the populace of San Cristóbal, in which many people had recently died, and which the survivors, attributed to the actions of the accused. Thus, even at this first level of Spanish officialdom, the charges of witchcraft *per se* were not even considered. Rather, the four prisoners were simply charged with the violation of a sacred place and the equivalent of creating a public nuisance or disturbing the peace. The prisoners were given three days to respond to the charges either in person or through counsel (*defensor*). In the interim, all statements previously collected were



confirmed by the witnesses (*ratificación*) who uniformly did so, while also declining to add any new information.

Somehow, the prisoners acquired a *defensor*, though whether he was named for them or not is unclear. At any rate, on August 3, *Alferez* Joseph Antonio González appeared formally before Ríos with his defense. He first protested the absence of a trained lawyer (*abogado*) to defend his clients, then went on to say that the charges were groundless and requested that the prisoners be absolved and set free. He argued that this was the only course to take since the proceedings had begun by extracting confessions illegally, through the use of methods "disclaimed even by the Turks". They were, therefore, invalid. González also pointed out that the *Governador* had also grossly exceeded his authority in allowing the Indian officials of another town to administer corporal punishment. Those were the true crimes, according to González.

Ríos was not technically qualified to pass final judgment in the case, thus all the records were sent to the capital for review and a decision by Licenciado Don Manuel Taracena, an *abogado* of the *Audiencia*.

Although not reviewed until February 10, 1751, Taracena summarily dismissed the charges against the four defendants. This was done first of all on the grounds that the confessions had been illegally extracted through torture. Also, Taracena cited the many contradictions in those confessions; the various locations of the tunics and book and the confusion over Soc's first name. In addition to granting the prisoners' freedom, Taracena also empowered them to proceed against those who had misused them so badly. Ríos was further ordered to officially investigate the death of Ramón Chay. If it was indeed a result of the torture he had received, Ríos was to proceed against the perpetrators. However, Taracena specified that any sentence be reviewed to insure that it be appropriate to the task of causing the Indians to "moderate" their behavior in the future.

On February 20, 1751 the order was received in Totonicapán and the four prisoners' ordeal was over. As there is no record of any further civil or criminal action related to the case, we must assume the matter officially ended here.

Perhaps the most significant and interesting aspect of the episode is the way in which the *principales* engineered their witchcraft charges against a group rather than just an individual. In



any society with such beliefs, charges of witchcraft against an individual are fairly straightforward, the key clue being some form of deviant behavior (deviance always being culturally defined). Yet the *principales* of San Cristóbal were not after just one person, but a group. How best to make their charges of conspiracy believable and at the same time of such a nature as to demand immediate and violent local action? More specifically, after what kind of group should or could the *principales* model their imaginary cabal? An analysis of the symbols utilized in the story of the alleged witches' activities indicates that the *principales* either consciously or unconsciously used the model and symbols of a *cofradía* as the basis for the witches' organization. In developing their story, many of the symbols were inverted in meaning and combined with other elements associated with indigenous ideas of both witchcraft and divination. The resulting "melange" provides unique fascinating insights into the symbolic world and world view of highland Maya people during the later Colonial period.

Taking the elements of the story in rough order, the first feature of interest is the supposed *maestro* of the claimed conspiracy, Juan or Miguel Soc. In terms of Maya witchcraft beliefs, it is significant that he was alleged to come from another community. Beliefs that more powerful witches and shamans always exist in *other* communities is a widespread highland Maya belief recorded ethnographically.<sup>18</sup> The world beyond the boundaries of the community is a dangerous place, inhibited by people with powers that are correspondingly more dangerous even than those of local witches or shamans. Also, outsiders are not bound by the ties of real and fiction kinship, or even face-to-face association, which might moderate the evil designs of a local witch. Thus, the choice of an imaginary outsider as leader of the conspiracy made it much more potentially threatening than if it were presented as entirely local.

The *maestro's* arrival every 20 days constitutes a firm association with divinatory beliefs and practices. The period of 20 days constitutes a "month", of which there are 13 in the 260-day divinatory calendar of native Mesoamerican peoples. A further association with divination is made through the rock crystal that Soc supposedly used. Such crystals are a common (if not universal)

<sup>18</sup> See Reina 1965:275, Bunzel 1952:298.



component in highland Maya diviners' kits as recorded ethnographically.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, the claim that Soc was paid for his services seems to be drawn more from associations with Catholic priests than with anything in the Maya tradition. A witch or shaman would certainly be paid for his curing or harming activities by a client. However, the description of Soc's activities made him appear much more as a ritual leader for a nightmare *cofradía* (albeit with magical powers) than just an occult specialist. Just like the priest, who is an outsider, who may only visit periodically and who must be paid for officiating at certain rituals, the imaginary Soc came periodically and for a fee from another place to lead a group of locals in ritual. However, the concept is inverted since the priest's rituals are, at least ostensibly, for the good of the people, while the alleged aim of Soc and his conspirators was evil (causing deaths).

The timing of the group's supposed activities at night is hardly surprising. It constitutes another inversion of normal *cofradía* practices since most legitimate ceremonies occur during the day and/or have a significant component of public display. Among the Maya, as in many other cultures, nighttime is dangerous. It is the time when witchcraft and other bad deeds such as murder, theft, and adultery occur.

It is in the paraphernalia of the group that we see the most significant symbolic associations with *cofradía* organization. The tunics and drum were almost certainly modeled in the *principales'* minds after the clothing worn by *cofradía* members to identify them as such on ceremonial occasions and after the instrument that announces and accompanies their processions. *Cofradías* during the Colonial period also had books in which their financial accounts were kept and the alleged presence of a book may be a further attempt to fix the idea of a counter-*cofradía* even more firmly in peoples' minds.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, however, in a mostly non-literate, peasant society, books are sources of knowledge, and thus power, denied to most people. They are also by definition foreign and thus doubly dangerous.

Finally, the alleged activities of the group constitute a total inversión of normal *cofradía* practices and aims. First, *cofradía*

<sup>19</sup> See Bunzel 1952:287, Wisdom 1940:345, Tedlock 1981:158-170 and Colby and Colby 1982:226.

<sup>20</sup> For a brief description of such account books see Hill (N.D.).



activities are normally for the good of the community as a whole. The accused conspirators' activities were for the exact opposite purpose, to harm the entire community. Their means of achieving this was also an inversion. As we saw in the proceedings of the case itself, the disinterred bones were entrusted to the *cofradías* for reburial (whether or not it was customary for *cofradías* to officiate at individual funerals during this period is not known; certainly it is not recorded ethnographically). Thus, at least in some circumstances, *cofradías* bury the bones of the unknown dead of the community in a known and sacred or appropriate location. Significantly, the conspirators were charged with the precise opposite; disinterring the community's dead, and then reusing the remains to magically cause further deaths through reburial in unknown and non-sacred or inappropriate places.

The fact that the charges of conspiracy were accepted locally indicates the credibility of the symbols among the local population and reflects their skillful manipulation by the *principales*. Given their beliefs and the state of panic already probably induced by the epidemic, people in San Cristóbal were certainly predisposed to credit witchcraft as the cause and demand action. Yet the vividly detailed image of a nightmare-*cofradía*, with extra-community leadership and evil intent, must surely have fanned the flames of the crowd's desire for action. The "fact" that the members of this counter-*cofradía* were all officials of the church (or their close relatives) made their crimes just that much worse. In such a crisis situation, the extreme actions taken against the prisoners needed no justification at all in local eyes. They could even be interpreted as a legitimate effort at self defense.

As an attempt at revenge or to reaffirm their dominance in the community, the *principales'* ploy was a master stroke bespeaking a great understanding of both the local beliefs and group psychology. Through their denunciations and artfully contrived story, they managed the situation so that their victims received such excruciating punishments that one later died. The others also endured a year of incarceration. Yet the *principales* themselves never raised a hand or turned a key. All the actual punishments were inflicted by outsiders. The *principales* could be accused of nothing more than rumor-mongering or being swept up in a wave of panic during the epidemic. According to Maya logic, their suspicions and accusations of witchcraft had been sound. Under Spanish law there was no crime with which to charge them.



### *Conclusions*

It is difficult and dangerous to extrapolate from two cases of witchcraft in the 18th century or to gauge the meaning of similarities and differences as compared to 20th century beliefs and practices. Still, some divergences do stand out and require comment and even some speculation as a basis for future research.

The most striking divergence is the general tenor of witchcraft when compared to contemporary Maya beliefs and practices in the western highlands. Today, beliefs stress interaction with supernaturals and their direct intervention as the primary witchcraft technique. As recorded by Bunzel and more recently Tedlock, a major Quiché technique is to "ask justice" from the ancestors as a way to obtain revenge for an injury.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, magical techniques may be used. In either case, both are tightly bound up with calendrics and divination. The 260 days and associated forces of the divinatory calendar may be invoked to help cause the death of a victim. Also, specific days in the calendar are more propitious for making requests of the ancestors or other supernaturals.<sup>22</sup> The Tzotzil of Chiapas lack the divinatory calendar but still believe in the intervention of supernaturals in the form of the "earth lord" to whom souls are sold by witches. This belief co-exists with the ingestion of "poisonous" substances as the mainstays of witchcraft.<sup>23</sup>

In both areas, cures involve still more interaction with supernaturals. Divination is central to Quiché attempts to counter witchcraft. If the powers are properly approached, then the cause of the illness and the victim's enemy may be ascertained and counter-sorcery may be initiated. Among the Tzotzil suspected witches may simply be assassinated, but, short of this, normal procedures involve getting the "sender" of illness to break his contract with the earth lord.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1715 witchcraft case there is no direct evidence for any of these beliefs. Witchcraft and its cure appear much more direct and mechanical. There is no indication that supernaturals were invoked for curing per-se. Socop did attempt to contact forces associated with the church, but this was only to ask their permis-

<sup>21</sup> See Bunzel 1952:294-295, Tedlock 1981:129.

<sup>22</sup> See Bunzel 1952:277-286, Tedlock 1981:107-131.

<sup>23</sup> See Vogt 1969:408-409.

<sup>24</sup> See Vogt 1969:407, 410.



sion to cure, not to enlist their aid or direct intercession. The burning of candles in another room by Quonon while curing took place is suggestive of some sort of supplication or offering (since one presumes they were not just being burned for light) but, unfortunately, there is no indication of their precise function or relationship to the cure (if any) and to what power(s) they might have been addressed. Instead, witchcraft beliefs involved the ingestion of a substance as the cause of illness and its removal as the cure; evidently without the divination and shrine visiting so prominent in the ethnographic record.

These differences tempt one to suggest that the association of divination and supernaturals with witchcraft beliefs are innovations which postdate the early to mid-18th century dates of the cases reviewed here. Perhaps the use of divination as a diagnostic device and belief in supernaturals as potential causes of illness are extensions of these basic traditional beliefs to a new domain which had previously been dominated by the relatively simpler foreign-substance/extraction-by-shaman concepts. On the other hand, the use and acceptance of symbols identified with divination in the *principales'* conspiracy tale and the purported placement of the ancestors' bones at various shrine locations suggests that the association between these "contemporary-sounding" beliefs and practices and witchcraft were already forming if not yet fully institutionalized in 1750. However, these associations were made in a fictive context and involved the unprecedented accusations of a conspiracy on the part of a group. Regretfully, the data at present do not allow us to decide the issue. Still, it is hoped that, through presentation of the two cases and the information they contain, some aspects of 18th century highland Maya world view can be discerned and a basis for comparison with other such cases (should they come to light) and contemporary beliefs has been established.

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