POISONED RELATIONS: MEDICINE, SORCERY, AND POISON TRIALS IN THE CONTESTED ATLANTIC, 1680-1850

A Dissertation
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By

Chelsea L. Berry, B.A.

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From 1680 to 1850, courts in the slave societies of the western Atlantic tried hundreds of free and enslaved people of African descent for poisoning others, often through sorcery. As events, poison accusations were active sites for the contestation of ideas about health, healing, and malevolent powers. Many of these cases centered on the activities of black medical practitioners. This thesis explores changes in ideas about poison through the wave of poison cases over this 170-year period and the many different people who made these changes and were bound up these cases. It analyzes over five hundred investigations and trials in Virginia, Bahia, Martinique, and the Dutch Guianas—each vastly different slave societies that varied widely in their conditions of enslaved labor, legal systems, and histories. It is these differences that make the shared patterns in the emergence, growth, and decline of poison cases, and of the relative importance of African medical practitioners within them, so intriguing. Across these four locations, there was a specific, temporally bounded, and widely shared relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery in this period. This relationship centered on medical practitioners of African descent involved in poison cases where the affliction, cure, or both were made with sorcery. My quantitative analysis of these cases also reveals a shared cluster of cases in the mid-eighteenth century—before the age of revolutions—and a heavily male gender ratio among the accused. These findings complicate the focus historians have placed on famous cases occurring in the context of wars and highlight a significant change from contemporary European associations between poison and women. These poison cases were central to a long interaction
and transformation of ideas about the causes of and solutions to illness, which were among the most formative and fundamental challenges faced by people in the Atlantic World.
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INTRODUCTION

Whether one moves away from oneself in cultural space or in historical times, one does not go far before one is in a world where the taken-for-granted must cease to be so.

- Rhys Isaac

Consider the following: a paper packet containing herbs and a root buried under a path; a medicine given from one enslaved person to another without the knowledge or consent of their owners; pouches of unknown “drugs” distributed from plantation to plantation and suspected of being capable of causing languishing illnesses; and small pieces of a certain stone mixed into a chocolate to change a slaveholder’s behavior. Which of these was “poison”? The question is a trick. They all were, or at least they were all investigated as such. There is a danger of uncritically imposing a singular definition of “poison” into the past without thinking through what it meant to whom and when and what they did about it. This dissertation explores how this capacious category of “poison” emerged, developed, and declined in the Atlantic world—a space of intense cross-cultural interaction and contestation of ideas—from the late seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. It simultaneously asks how the different actors involved in poisoning cases—slaveholders and slaves; practitioners and clients; accused, accusers, witnesses, and judges—perceived and understood these poisoning events. The meanings of “poison” were not only numerous, but contested; people in the Atlantic world struggled with each other over differing interpretations which, especially in the context of trials, could have deadly

consequences. I track the history of the relationships between ideas about poison and the people who held them in the geography of this “contested Atlantic.”

From 1680 to 1850, courts in Virginia, Martinique, Suriname, and Bahia tried hundreds of free and enslaved people of African descent for poisoning others, often through sorcery. As events, poison accusations were active sites for the contestation of ideas about health, healing, and malevolent powers. Many of these cases centered on the activities of black medical practitioners. For example, in 1749, several residents of a Salvador neighborhood complained to the Inquisition about the deaths caused by Paulo Gomes and Ignacia, well-known free feiticeiros (sorcerers) of African descent who could both inflict and treat illnesses caused by feitiços (magical charms or spells, sometimes used interchangeably with “poison”). Seven years earlier in Suriname, an enslaved medical practitioner named Goliath was convicted and executed for making vergift (poison) from the burial grounds, hiding it in his house, and using it to kill other slaves. The trials of the slaves Jean François in Martinique (1742) and Tom in Virginia (1744) each revolved around the suspect and possibly poisonous nature of their drugs, mysterious powders, and remedies. These four cases unfolded in four very different colonies, yet each shared a set of associations: medical practitioners of African descent connected to poison accusations and practices of sorcery. These medical practitioners were central to the emergence of poisoning cases in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and to their mid-century spikes after the 1740s. In the late eighteenth century, their relative importance to these cases

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3 I use “black” (e.g. “black medical practitioners”) to refer to both Africans and people of African descent born in the Americas, following the same convention as Pablo F. Gómez in Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).
declined, and the number of cases themselves then faded. By the mid-nineteenth century, black medical practitioners and their practices were no longer central to poisoning trials.

This thesis explores changes in ideas about poison through the wave of poison cases over this 170-year period and the many different people who made these changes and were bound up in these cases. I have analyzed over five hundred investigations and trials in Virginia, Bahia, Martinique, and the Dutch Guianas (which include both Suriname and the former Dutch colonies that later became British Guiana) —each vastly different slave societies that varied widely in their conditions of enslaved labor, legal systems, and histories. It is these differences that make the shared patterns I have discovered in the emergence, growth, and decline of poison cases, and of the relative importance of African medical practitioners within them, so intriguing. Across these four locations, I argue that there was a specific, temporally bounded, and widely shared relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery in this period. This relationship centered on medical practitioners of African descent involved in poison cases where the affliction, cure, or both were made with sorcery. My quantitative analysis of these cases also reveals a shared cluster of cases in the mid-eighteenth century—before the age of revolutions—and a heavily male gender ratio among the accused. These findings complicate the focus historians have placed on famous cases occurring in the context of wars and highlight a significant change from contemporary European associations between poison and women. These poison cases were central to a long interaction and transformation of ideas about the causes of and solutions to illness, which were among the most formative and fundamental challenges faced by people in the Atlantic World.
Existing studies of poison cases have predominantly trained their focus on single colonies or empires without expanding their analyses to contemporary cases. Good work has been done, particularly in the French imperial context, examining waves of poison cases and their local contexts. Understanding both the fine-grained local conditions and the particular colonial and imperial laws that shaped poison trials is crucial for grounding any comparative analysis. However, by limiting their studies to specific locales, these works have missed important connections between cases, especially in the expressions of African ideas on health, healing, and malevolence among enslaved communities—which also conducted poisoning investigations. A geographically discrete approach can not fully embrace the phenomenon because poison cases and the dynamic ideas that shaped them were not unique to any one location, but spilled beyond imperial and linguistic boundaries.

Several collaborative works bringing together cases of spiritual practices and their prosecution in the Caribbean and comparative analyses of the use of poison/sorcery in famous rebellions have made progress in this direction. Yet the comparison of isolated cases—especially the most famous cases—alone misses their position in a wider context of poisoning.

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trials. Bringing together scholarship from multiple historians—each with their own approaches—
around a shared theme can also miss patterns that are only revealed by examining cases from
many locations at once through the same approach. By putting individual poison cases in both
the context of other poison cases from the same location over a long period and the context of
contemporary cases from other locales, my work allows for a wider scope of analysis.

The broad geographic perspective I have taken in this work—one that has allowed me to
see otherwise obscured relationships between societies and track shared cultural transformations
over time—comes from Atlantic history. Since its emergence as a field in the 1980s and
flowering in the 1990s, Atlantic history has invited greater possibilities for drawing connections
and comparisons beyond the confines of national histories. By tracking the trans-regional
movement and interaction of ideas about poison, my research engages with two recent theoretical
frameworks developed by Atlanticists: circulation—of ideas, goods, and peoples—and
entanglement—a way to describe mutually influencing and interconnected phenomena across
societies. Scholars who examine circulation in early modern knowledge creation have brought
together multiple and contested ideas on health and healing and asked how these ideas impacted
each other across space and time. An entangled and trans-imperial approach to the Atlantic has
proved important because individual colonies contained highly diverse European, African, and
indigenous populations; political control could and did change imperial hands; and colonial

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7 Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005);
institutions frequently drew upon the shared experience of their counterparts across political borders.  

An exploration of accusations of poisoning in the western Atlantic requires an understanding of changing ideas about poison and sorcery in the eastern Atlantic. Poison cases in the western Atlantic that linked concerns about sorcery used for healing and harm emerged at the same moment—the late seventeenth century—when most studies of European and Euro-American witchcraft come to a close. The deep and rich literature on the early modern European witch hunts has offered important insights on the relationship between witchcraft beliefs and the institutional formation of witch trials. The explosion of trials in the sixteenth century was not the result of any one factor, but a combination of judicial changes and new intellectual links between witches and diabolism—as necessary preconditions for the trials—and more immediate causes in the century’s religious wars and heightened social anxiety. A turn in this literature since the 1980s has also insisted on taking an emic approach—attempting to understand how early modern Europeans understood witchcraft—rather than thinking about witchcraft belief in the terms of ignorance or looking for “real” explanations. Works on ideas about witchcraft in early America have likewise sought to understand the ideas of Europeans, Indians, and Africans on their own terms while exploring how cross-cultural interactions altered and reshaped these ideas.

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In the past two decades, a turn in the field of European magic of has examined the durability of belief in witches and other forms of magic long after the end of witch trials in the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment.\(^{13}\) Communities in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe continued to be concerned with the harmful actions of witches, and took actions to diagnose and seek protection from bewitchment. There has likewise been a turn in Caribbean and Brazilian history exploring sorcery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\(^{14}\) While this project focuses on the waves of poison trials that had largely ended by the mid-nineteenth century, through the examination of the connections between poison and sorcery my work contributes to the extended periodization of European witchcraft and magic beliefs.

My work also builds on the literature on concerns about and the prosecution of witchcraft in an African context and the relationship between sorcery and power. Witchcraft has a very long history in the study of Africa and in the origins of the field of anthropology itself.\(^{15}\) In the past two decades, historians and anthropologists of Africa have analyzed the relationships between


politics, spirits, and witches—particularly the connection between leadership and power. As with witchcraft in European and American contexts, this work has also reassessed the periodization of sorcery in framing ideas about witches not as some traditional ‘survival,’ but rather a durable—yet ever-changing—way of thinking about power. For example, anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey’s work with the BaKongo illuminates the ways in which sorcery has been both political and personal; rather than “witchcraft,” he proposes thinking about kindoki as “the exercise of power in social relations.” Sorcery is not code for political power as the “real” phenomenon; rather, it has been understood in West Central Africa as power, and power is relational. This insight—not so much that sorcery is political but that political power is a form of sorcery—has been influential for thinking about relationships of power in Atlantic Africa and the African diaspora in the early modern period.

Through its connection to power, the history of sorcery is necessarily intertwined with the history of medicine, as Europeans and Africans have perceived malevolent practices through damage to personal health—rendering a person powerless. My work brings together insights from the history of medicine from literature on both Europe and Africa. Over the past twenty years, historians of medicine in Europe have increasingly made connections between the histories of medicine and magic, expanding studies of medical practitioners to include Portuguese curandeiros (popular healers sometimes tried by the Inquisition as sorcerers) and

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“cunning-folk” in England.\textsuperscript{20} In focusing their analyses respectively on the period of the Enlightenment and through the nineteenth century, these works also contributed to the push to expand the periodization of magic, noted above. This expansion of the roster of practitioners is connected to a major shift in the historiography of European medicine to look beyond histories of professionalization to examine the medical ideas held by patients.\textsuperscript{21} Central to the “cultural turn” in the history of medicine has been the idea of mediation, where doctors, patients, relatives, and divine powers like Catholic saints together contributed and negotiated interpretations, diagnoses, and cures of illnesses over the course of the medical process—the whole series of events in an illness.\textsuperscript{22} This work opens up the scope of medical history to include patients’ own definitions of illness. In doing so, it connects medical encounters to webs of social context and meaning that had multiple nodes. The poison cases I study in the western Atlantic were embedded in medical processes; by exploring the webs of relationships and negotiated interpretations in these cases I both draw on and contribute to this expansion of the field.

The historiography of medicine in Africa has also analyzed the relationships between healing, malevolent power, and the political and social relationships organized to manage both. My work on poisoning cases draws on two key frameworks: therapy management and public healing. At its core, therapy management focuses on the social relationships that shape medical knowledge and action.\textsuperscript{23} Parallel to the turn in European medical historiography, the emergence


\textsuperscript{22} Willem de Blécourt and Cornelie Usborne, eds., \textit{Cultural Approaches to the History of Medicine: Mediating Medicine in Early Modern and Modern Europe} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). See particularly de Blécourt and Usborne’s introduction, “Chapter 1 Medicine, Mediation and Meaning.”

\textsuperscript{23} While largely taken up by Africanists, the origination of this framework involved medical anthropologists studying cases from very different locales—from Kongo to Quebec—and discussing their work together at an
of the framework of therapy management expands the negotiation and interpretation of affliction to a wide group of actors, each with their own perspectives, and focuses on the therapeutic process rather than single events. Public healing is a framework developed by Africanists for understanding the relationship between politics and broadly defined social illness and cures. In the conception laid out by historian Steven Feierman and anthropologist John Janzen, healing and health need to be understood as relational and fundamentally rooted in historically changing social orders. Succinctly, whoever has had the power to diagnose illness has had the power to define cultural conceptions of evil and harm in the wider public. In its relationship to conceptions of afflictions as public threats, public healing has been intertwined with the responsibilities of powerful leaders to cure them. As with sorcery, healing was inherently political. Public healing is useful for thinking about poison cases in the western Atlantic both for the way it connects medicine to political power and for the emphasis it places on the need to understand social relationships to understand the diagnosis and curing of illnesses.


For examples of the development and expression of these responsibilities in a West Central African context, see MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*; Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*.

own choosing as a struggle between owners and slaves. In slave societies, slaveholders held enormous power over the lives of the enslaved. Violence was a central component of slavery and slaveholders could and did use force to impose their preferred medical treatment on their slaves. Studies have examined the negotiation and contestation of medical treatment between owners and slaves, as well as that in the relationship between black medical practitioners and the slave owners who both relied upon and distrusted their services. However, a focus on the struggle between slaves or practitioners with slave owners alone can miss the relationships of power within enslaved communities and between slaves and practitioners—along with the accusations of harm caused by sorcery originating from inside these communities. The webs of social relationships among the enslaved necessary to understanding both sorcery accusations and efforts to diagnose and treat illnesses were complex and not necessarily harmonious. Slave quarters were spaces of forced intimacy, potential sources of both solidarity and fear. Fraught relationships—not only between slaveholders and slaves, but also between slaves—were at the heart of both poison accusations and medical treatment.

Historians have linked the investigation of medical practices and ideas in the context of slavery with their debates on creolization—the creation of new cultures in the Atlantic world.

31 For exceptions that do explore these tensions and relationships in detail, see Fett, *Working Cures*; Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners.”
32 For more on intimate spaces as locales conducive to witchcraft accusations, see Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust.*
My project speaks to and helps reframe this long and ongoing conversation on cultural transmission and transformation in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. The central problem for historians has been determining the relative importance of Africa to understanding the cultures of African descendants in the Americas. As a critique of a generation of anthropological work focused on static African survivals, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s influential 1976 intervention pushed the conversation away from African origins by emphasizing the importance of historical context, both in the demographic challenges of the transatlantic slave trade and in the power relationships of slave societies in the Americas. With the flowering of scholarship in the 1990s on Africa in the Atlantic world, African historians, led by John Thornton and Paul Lovejoy, have revised Mintz and Price’s arguments by identifying strong connections between particular regions of Africa and the Americas and investigating cross-cultural encounters and syncretism in the eastern Atlantic. I join the most useful recent interpretations of creolization for understanding cultural change in the western Atlantic in pushing past the debate on cultural change vs. continuity to examine what practices and rituals of diverse peoples “did” and how they interacted in particular contexts of power.

The four political jurisdictions at the center of this study—Bahia, Martinique, Virginia, and the Dutch Guianas—are not necessarily an intuitive grouping. All four locales were slave societies; by the late seventeenth century in Virginia, Martinique, and the Dutch Guianas—and significantly earlier for Bahia—their respective economies, social relations, and legal structures

35 For an example of this interpretation, see Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders, eds., *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean*.  
revolved around slavery. However, they were not all the same. They each were a part of different empires; Bahia as a slave society was significantly older than the other locations; and Virginia had several dramatic differences in the lower proportion of the enslaved of the general population, the higher proportion of creoles (American born) in the enslaved population, and the main system of enslaved labor revolving around tobacco rather than sugar. When there has been comparative work done on poisoning, it has almost always centered on famous mid-century poisoning events in Jamaica and Saint-Domingue—the “jewels” of their respective empires. I chose these four very different locations for my study precisely because of their legal, demographic, cultural, and economic divergences; they highlight the striking similarities I found in poisoning cases. The poisoning wave was a trans-imperial phenomenon inextricably bound with the power relationships of slave societies and the ideas of the Africans forced into them.

I do not wish to imply that these were the only four slave societies in the western Atlantic with the kinds of poison cases connected to black medical practitioners and sorcery highlighted in this study; historians working on these locales and others—such as Saint-Domingue, South Carolina, the British West Indies, and the Spanish Caribbean—have also discussed similar cases. However, the four locations I chose each had comparable runs of surviving trial records that allowed for large scale comparative analysis that were not always available for other

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36 For more on the idea of slave societies vs. societies with slaves, see Berlin, Generations of Captivity.
locations. For example, while evidence from other sources points to cases of poisoning in eighteenth-century Jamaica, the only surviving pre-1770 regular slave court records for the British Caribbean is a spreadsheet-style summary from 1834 of cases tried before the St. Andrews parish slave court from 1746 to 1782.\textsuperscript{40} Due to their differences, my four cases from four empires offer a broad sampling of the wider poisoning phenomenon.

Trials form the backbone of this project. For most of the court systems, I was able to collect information on individuals from all social groups tried for all crimes, allowing me to place poison in a wider criminal context and track changes in this context over time.\textsuperscript{41} My analysis of this data is also informed by close readings of various laws and local ordinances on poison; trials only made sense in the context of the laws under which courts tried them. Changes in criminal laws give us insight into shifting relationships of power through the ability to define crime. Poison legislation marked these relationships through boundary drawing for what constituted the legitimate practice of medicine and the limits of a slaveholder’s power to judge their slaves.\textsuperscript{42} Correspondence between colonial officials and various metropoles both enriches the context for poison trials and laws and, in some cases, helps bridge gaps in trial data. Together, the trials, laws, and correspondence weave a large tapestry on the emergence, growth, and decline of poison cases and the relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery embedded in them.


\textsuperscript{41}Surviving records from the Lisbon Inquisition (1536-1821), police investigation reports from Cachoeira in Bahia (1751-1839 [1820-1839]), Suriname (1722-1828) and Berbice (1764-1793) Courts of Policy and Criminal Justice, the Martinique Conseil Supérieur (1729-1778) and assize court records for Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre (1830-1848) all fit this description. Virginian county courts (1704-1865) only contained criminal trials of slaves, the Cour Prévôtale (1822-1826) tried slaves and free people of color exclusively for the crime of poison, and the Fiscal’s reports from Berbice (1819-1832) and Demerara & Essequibo (1826-1834)—as part of the new British Guiana—only handled complaints by and against slaves.

The trials are such valuable sources not only for their quantitative and qualitative data, but as sites of action where actors articulated multiple perspectives on poisoning. Our ability to observe these contested ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery is mediated through surviving sources.\textsuperscript{43} Of course, all trial records must be handled with caution, as individuals were highly unlikely to be speaking freely—especially when forced to defend themselves. This caution is especially necessary for working with cases from legal contexts that allowed for torture to extract confession, including the Lisbon Inquisition, the Suriname Court of Policy and Criminal Justice, and the French \textit{Ancien Régime} tribunal and appeals courts.\textsuperscript{44} However, records with testimony are still valuable as rare contemporary recordings of Africans and creoles of African descent in their own words—at least as recorded by clerks—and the stories that defendants chose to present to try to win their cases. I use their words, and the questions asked by the courts, to identify different assumptions and perspectives undergirding ideas about poison in particular cases, as well as the manipulation of these ideas. To explore the perspectives of different actors involved in poisoning cases, I combine information from the trials with supplementary evidence in official correspondence, plantation papers, and descriptions of cases in contemporary published works on poison. Dispatches and reports from governors and visiting inspectors often contained explanations from the perspective of slave owners and government officials on alleged poisoning practices. Personal correspondence written by slave owners involved in poison cases also offer an expanded view of their interpretation of poisoning events. Across three thematic chapters analyzing the perspectives of slaveholders, members of enslaved communities, and black medical practitioners, I approach the same body of sources from different angles and highlight different details.

\textsuperscript{43} Isaac, \textit{The Transformation of Virginia}, 324.
\textsuperscript{44} Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 960, 976-978; Mott, \textit{Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade}, 115; Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}, 70.
An additional word of caution is necessary on discrepancies in the level of detail provided by documents originating from different court systems—especially in relation to slaves who were not themselves among the accused. Both the surviving Virginia county court records and the eighteenth-century Martinique Conseil Supérieur records are case summaries: very useful for collecting demographic information on the accused, but often lacking in extensive detail about the exact affliction an alleged target suffered; how the case first came (or was brought) to the attention of slaveholders; or how suspicion landed on the individual being tried. As part of their discreet initial investigations following denunciations—which were sometimes launched by free and enslaved people of African descent—Inquisitorial commissioners in Bahia often cast a wide net in interviewing community members, including slaves, who might be able to shed light on accusations. These records were fairly detailed, but were also shaped by the questions commissioners asked. The trial records from Suriname have by far the most detail about slaves in the orbit of poisoning events as they contain transcripts of questions and answers of both defendants and witnesses. However, even in the Suriname cases there was significant variety in the manner enslaved voices appeared in each case. Sometimes courts recorded slaves as witnesses delivering testimony in the courtroom; in other cases, their statements were collected as depositions to be read, or summarized by a slave owner or overseer when making their deposition or testimony to the court. Trial records contain a wealth of information, but they do have significant limitations. Wherever possible, I have corroborated evidence from trials with information from plantation papers and personal and official correspondence.

Understanding the multi-faceted phenomenon of poison cases in the western Atlantic requires a multi-faceted approach. My project makes an important intervention through an innovative combination of methods for different layers of analysis. I see my work as a social
history of ideas: tracking the transmission, transformation, and interaction of ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery while never losing sight of the people who created, shaped, and lived them. It is also an intellectual history that looks beyond elites to see what Rhiannon Stephens and Axel Fleisch describe as “the intellectual work of ordinary people.” Multiple languages and methods have made it possible for me to approach my sources from multiple angles. Quantitative analysis, taken from social history, of the demographics and content of poison trials has yielded insights on large social patterns over time and connections between my research locations. Thick descriptions of individual poison cases and close attention to the perspectives of the various actors within them, borrowed from anthropology, have assisted my efforts to understand how people involved in these cases saw and comprehended these events themselves. Finally, my training in the use of comparative historical linguistics and philology grounds ideas expressed in poison cases in deeper changes over time, and has allowed me to expand my field of inquiry to oral societies beyond (predominantly European-created) written records.

Historical linguistics—a method that has been used by Africanists for decades but is largely new for Atlanticists—requires further explanation to understand how it works and what kinds of insights it can offer. The basic idea of the method is that languages are archives. Words have histories, as human speakers of languages have created new words and changed the meanings of existing words over time. By paying close attention to the phonology of words and the distribution of meanings across related languages, I can reconstruct the histories of word roots. While the method makes frequent use of dictionaries and ethnographies created in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries—both for attestations of words and for descriptive ‘meat’ that can make clearer what speakers meant when making these attestations—historical linguistics is *not* simply the imposition of modern meanings of words into the past. The end result of such word reconstruction is comparable, though with a different degree of certainty, to the end result of a word history created through a text-based philological analysis.46 (See Appendix A for greater detail on this methodology).

A drawback of using language as a source, that it cannot provide information on the lived experiences of individuals, is also one of its greatest strengths. The archive of words in a language is a truly democratic source of information.47 I can not know the conversations of individual speakers in the way that I could by examining personal letters or recorded testimony, but I can see changes in word meanings over time that reflect hegemonic ways of speaking.48 It is very difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to create a new word and have it last in a spoken language without other individuals finding it useful and using it. I use the word histories reconstructed through historical linguistics to help build my “social history of ideas.”

This dissertation has five chapters, divided by methodological approaches and a focus on differing vantage points to understand poison in the Atlantic world. The first chapter is a history of ideas tracking long-term changes over time in European, West African, and West Central African ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery. I use historical linguistics to create an analysis of reconstructed African root words to compliment philological work in published and manuscript European sources; with both, I track movement and changes in metaphors used in

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relation to poison. People from these three broad regions brought ways of discussing illness, healing, and malevolent harm with them into the western Atlantic and adapted them to new circumstances; at the same time, people in the eastern Atlantic transformed their ideas through cross-cultural interactions.

The bulk of my dissertation borrows from a combination of a social historical analysis of the trials and anthropological close readings of individual cases to examine multiple perspectives and interpretations of poisoning events. The second and third chapters approach the phenomenon of poison cases from the perspectives of the slaveholders and colonial officials and their efforts to assert and maintain control over slaves and medical practitioners. These actors made the laws and ran the courts that tried poison cases, shaping the contours of my dataset. In Chapter 2, I explore these laws and their relationship to the emergence, acceleration, and decline of poison trials. I found that laws created by whites and the poison cases tried under these laws in Bahia, the Dutch Guianas, Virginia, and Martinique—four very different locations—nevertheless followed similar trajectories over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I track patterns in the demographics and contents of my dataset of 515 poison cases, uncovering unexpected connections and a timeline that challenges prevailing interpretations of poison cases as primarily products of mid-eighteenth-century wars and rebellions. In Chapter 3, I examine slaveholders’ ideas and their relationships to slaves and free and enslaved medical practitioners of African descent more closely. Slave owners discussed poisoning events, especially slaves’ efforts to “tame” or alter the behavior of their owners, as fundamentally usurpations of power.

The remaining two chapters explore diasporic African perspectives on poisoning cases. Chapter 4 explores poisoning events from the perspectives of the enslaved. Slaves both sought their own medical care—often from medical practitioners of African descent and in defiance of
the law—and actively instigated some poison investigations targeting these same healers. I argue that poison accusations and medical care among the enslaved need to be considered together in order to understand healing as a community event deeply entwined with overlapping systems of justice. My final chapter turns to black medical practitioners themselves. These practitioners were valued and feared by both slaveholders and slaves for their skills, placing them in a relatively powerful, but precarious, social position. Knowledge was the basis of their power, allowing them to offer a range of services to clients within and beyond enslaved communities. I examine the ways in which reputation, so necessary for attracting clientele, also made practitioners vulnerable to accusations of poisoning.

Ideas are not free floating; humans create, adapt, and act on them, and it is humans who live with the consequences of these actions. While this project is in some senses an intellectual history—tracking how ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery became intertwined and changed over time—my primary concern is the lives of the people who articulated and constructed these ideas. To paraphrase Marc Bloch, I try to be like the giant from the fairy tale, ever seeking the scent of my human quarry.  

For the people involved in poisoning cases of the slave societies of the western Atlantic, the stakes could not have been higher. For members of enslaved communities banding together to support an afflicted relative from a perceived malevolent attack; for slaveholders who imposed terror on plantations while grappling with fears of being poisoned by their property; and for black medical practitioners who continued cultivating practices of healing and harm in the face of high risk of arrest and execution, poison cases were matters of life and death. This work explores how these diverse peoples thought about and acted upon them.

CHAPTER 1: POISONING CULTURES IN THE EASTERN ATLANTIC, c. 0 C.E. – 1850

Francisco Buytrago believed he had made a discovery of great significance: a new tool to combat demons.¹ A knight of the Order of Christ—a highly prestigious order that had included Henry the Navigator and Vasco da Gama—and a cavalry officer stationed in Angola for twenty years in the 1710s and 20s, he drafted a manuscript on the uses of what he dubbed “the tree of life” in an effort to enter the realm of European intellectuals interested in bioprospecting and material medica—materials which could be used to fight afflictions caused by demonic agency.²

He claimed to have spent a significant amount of time observing the work of medical practitioners in Angola and the Kingdom of Kongo and asking them questions. It was through these connections, and through enslaved informants in Angola, that he learned about the “greatly esteemed” cassa tree, “the most singular counter-poison that there is in the whole world.”³

Buytrago saw healers use this small yellow tree with thick bark like a pine to cure a man who was greatly swollen from “malifícios” [sic] (evil spells) and noted the bark’s virtue against “feitiços e veneno” (sorcery objects/charms and poison).⁴ Furthermore, Buytrago reported that people used this bark preventatively, possibly in amulets or charms, to keep feitiços from reaching their target. Based on its powerful virtues and proven efficacy in the work of these

¹ Francisco de Buytrago, “Arvore da Vida, e Thezouro Descuberto da Avore Irmãa da que se Fez a Cruz da Nossa Redempção: Para Livrar dos Maleficios do Demonio, P.A. Vida e Saude dos Enfeitiçados ou Vexados do Mesmo Demonio, e Outras Mtas,” 1731, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (BNP), codigo 13114, reel 437 (microfilm). A special thank you to Ben Breen, who very kindly introduced me to this manuscript that he found in the Biblioteca Nacional.

² Benjamin Patrick Breen, “Tropical Transplantations: Drugs, Nature, and Globalization in the Portuguese and British Empires, 1640-1755” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas – Austin, 2015) 144, 175, 183. Breen focuses more on Buytrago in relation to drug circulation in the Portuguese and British Atlantic. For more on Buytrago and Portuguese ideas about Africa, see the entirety of “Chapter 3 Fetishizing Drugs: Feitiçaria and Poison in West Central Africa, 1660-1740.”


⁴ Buytrago, “Arvore da Vida,” 7-8. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi also described the poisonous “Cassa Vero” tree as an evergreen with leaves similar to a Laurel. Cavazzi also claims that “those who eat of [the fruit] are not subjected to certain infirmities of the country.” P. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, Istorica Descrittione de tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola (Milan: Nelle stampe del l'Agnelli, 1690), 1.25.
healers—which Buytrago interpreted as casting out demons—he enthusiastically promoted its adoption in exorcisms.⁵

Buytrago’s account of the “tree of life” is fascinating, but it is only part of the story. Based on his description and the term “cassa,” he likely was referring to *Erythrophleum sauveolens*—called *nkasa* by Kikongo speakers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kikongo speakers used this tree and associated words from the same root to discuss ordeal draughts, beverages made to test the innocence of those accused of a crime, as well as the venomous bark used both for these ordeals and as a fishing poison.⁶ The history of the ancient root of this word, *-káč-* (to dry up, coagulate, be hard)⁷ among the linguistic ancestors of Kikongo speakers and their “cousins” in the Njila language family further south reveals a long and fraught discussion of poison, affliction, acts of binding, and power. Furthermore, very likely this same tree and its usage in different poison ordeals appeared in European descriptions of practices in seventeenth and eighteenth-century West Africa. Buytrago’s story is an illustrative window into the relationships between poison, medicine, and sorcery and how they changed over time in Europe, West Africa, and West Central Africa.

People from these three broad regions brought their ideas with them into the western Atlantic and adapted them to new circumstances; at the same time, people in the eastern Atlantic transformed their own ideas through cross-cultural interactions. Europeans in the early modern period had developed a discourse of poison as a gendered crime committed by the weak against

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⁵ Buytrago, “Arvore da Vida,” 2-3, 5, 63. Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 186, fn. 345 p. 172. As Breen notes, it is likely that Buytrago’s efforts to get his manuscript accepted by the Inquisition censors failed—the Inquisition generally frowned upon lay-people performing exorcisms.


⁷ Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3 (BLR-3), no. 1646, C.S. 972.
the strong: wives poisoning husbands, servants poisoning masters, cowardly men resorting to
poison to defeat a stronger rival. This idea is so firmly rooted in Western discourse, that
contemporary European-descended observers of Caribbean poison cases, including anti-slavery
activists, approached these cases through this framework, focusing on accusations of slaves
poisoning slaveholders as usurpations or tools of the weak. In contrast, people in West and West
Central Africa in the early modern period built their discourse of poison around the idea of
poison as an abuse of power committed by the powerful.

Most scholarly work on poison cases in the slave societies of the western Atlantic has
been conducted within a framework of resistance, implicitly drawing on an idea that slaves used
poison as a means to fight people in a more powerful position than themselves. When we focus
exclusively on poison as a “weapon of the weak,” we are in danger of uncritically adopting the
perspective of Europeans and missing the fuller and much more complex picture of how different
people in the Atlantic world understood poison and poisoning cases. I argue that we need to
understand how people discussed and thought about poison, medicine, and sorcery in the eastern
Atlantic, and how they changed their ideas over time, in order to understand how people in the
western Atlantic transformed, wove together, and created new ideas.

Language is the key historical source that allows for this comparative analysis. One of the
major challenges of doing African history, and especially of doing comparative work between

8 I will explore this discourse in much greater depth in Chapter 3.
9 For example, see Schwarz, _Twice Condemned_; Fick, _The Making of Haiti_; Rudi Otto Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van
Jullie te Hebben”: Plantageslaven in Suriname, 1730-1750 (Utrecht: Instituut voor Culturele Antropologie te
Utrecht, 1994); Robert A. Voeks, _Sacred Leaves of Candomblé: African Magic, Medicine, and Religion in Brazil_
(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Rachel Harding, _A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative
Spaces of Blackness_ (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Bernard Moitt, _Women and Slavery in the
French Antilles, 1635-1848_ (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001); Chambers, _Murder at
Montpelier_; Weaver, _Medical Revolutionaries._
10 In a different context, William Reddy has similarly explored ways in which European ideas on romantic love were
neither timeless nor universal. See Wililam M. Reddy, _The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in
African and European history, is the difference in source bases. Most societies in early modern West and West Central Africa were orally based, and, with some exceptions, there are scant surviving documents created by Africans from this period. I am indebted to several important works in history and anthropology in the past decade that have brought together ideas on witchcraft and sorcery from Europe and Africa to trace their influence in the Americas. However, by being forced for their sections on Africa to rely upon predominantly European created observations from the early modern period—or, in the case of anthropologists, ethnographic work from the very recent past—these scholars have not been able to give a deeper history of how Africans discussed and changed their ideas before Europeans arrived. By adopting methods developed and used by historians of Africa, I am able, at least for West Central Africa, to create a *longue durée* history of ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery that reveals a two thousand-year critique of healing and healers as institutions of power. More historical linguistic work needs to be done to be able to conduct analysis of a similar depth for West Africa, but it can be done. It is through embracing Africanists’ methods that I can bring a much richer and deeper understanding to the ideas Africans in the Atlantic World held about poison,

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11 The letters from King Afonso I to several kings of Portugal in the early sixteenth century are a notable exception. See Linda Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61-70 for more on Afonso I and his letters.
A deep chronology of approximately two thousand years for the European and West Central African sections of this chapter is necessary for three reasons. First, change in language use is often slow and only visible from a significant distance. More recent changes and interactions between speakers of European and African languages from the late fifteenth century on can not be understood without understanding what words meant to language speakers before these interactions. Second, in order to understand how people in Western Europe and West Central Africa thought about poison, medicine, and sorcery on the eve of extensive cross-cultural contact, one must first understand prior regional changes and histories of cross-cultural mixing between language families that continued to have an impact into the Atlantic period. Finally, the work of historical linguistics requires going to the root of a language family, to the proto-language from which the relevant languages in an area descended, to understand their relationships to each other and how speakers changed the words that they used over time. In the case of West Central Africa, I chose the Njila language family as it includes many (though not all) of the languages spoken by peoples involved in and affected by the transatlantic slave trade in the region. Speakers of the root or mother language, Proto-Njila, overlapped in time with speakers of Latin in Europe—allowing for a comparable periodization.

Europe

Over a period of roughly two thousand years, Western Europeans elaborated on connections between poison and sorcery made by Latin speakers, and developed gendered links between poison, women, and witches. Europeans developed the gendering of their discourse on poison and magic over time in a way that continued beyond the witch trials of the early modern period. At the same time, Europeans intertwined their ideas about poison with their ideas about
medicine, with the eighteenth century as a period of flux for both. By closely examining the words Europeans used in early modern poison discourse, I can trace out a history of their development, and derive insights on the European contributions to ideas about poison in the Caribbean.

Speakers of Romance languages in the early modern period—as well as English speakers, by way of French loanwords—drew from two very different inherited Latin roots to discuss poison; roots that Latin speakers respectively used to connect poison to drinking and malevolent magic. The noun pōtiō, root of the French poison and Portuguese peçonha, had several meanings: the act of drinking, especially wine; a drink; a potion “given as a medicine”; and a potion “given to procure death” or enchantment. The connection between these potions to heal or kill—“potion” also being a word derived from the same root—was that they were substances consumed by drinking, as the noun pōtiō itself came from the verb pōtō (to drink, to swallow).

Latin speakers also used a root noun uenēnum (a potent herb or other substance used for medical, magical, etc. purposes; a magic or supernatural influence; a poison; the use of poison, poisoning as a criminal offense.) From uenēnum, Latin speakers developed a whole suite of words, including a transitive verb uenēno (to bewitch, enchant; to imbue or infect with poison), a noun uenēficum (the use of magical arts, sorcery; the act of poisoning; a potent or poisonous substance), and the practitioner noun uenēficus (sorcerer, poisoner—male or female). Romans in the late republic were concerned enough about the actions of uenefici to develop a law in 81 BCE against uenēficum as an action causing sudden or unexpected death through hidden means.

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of poison and/or sorcery.\textsuperscript{18}

The linguistic descendants of Latin speakers continued to elaborate and layer meanings onto \textit{uenēnum} and \textit{pōtiō}, while also innovating new words from Latin roots. French and Portuguese speakers continued to make the connection between magic and poison with \textit{uenēnum} words well into the early modern period. Speakers of Old French made a significant innovation in their usage of \textit{pōtiō} words in the twelfth century. While maintaining both medicinal and harmful connotations in the noun \textit{puison}, by c. 1130 they created a verb \textit{empoisonner} (to kill by poison). By the end of the thirteenth century, Old French speakers had further developed a new noun \textit{empoisonneur/euse} (person who poisons). Both the earlier \textit{poison} (n.) and the Old French innovations spread across the channel. In the fourteenth century Anglo-Norman speakers had adopted \textit{empoisoner} the verb, changing it to \textit{poison} (v.), and developed their own practitioner noun by adding an extension, \textit{poisoner} (person who poisons).\textsuperscript{19} These innovations are significant for what they reveal about the concerns of speakers of Old French and Anglo-Norman: both the verb and the practitioner noun had exclusively negative connotations—i.e. one would not use the verb \textit{empoisonner} to mean “to give medicine,” even if in Old French \textit{poison} still had older connections to drinks that could be either medicinal or harmful—and the fact that people felt the need to create a word to describe individuals who poison suggests that they were a topic of particular concern.

The Ibero-Romance speaking ancestors of Portuguese speakers took a slightly different path. Portuguese speakers only began to use \textit{peçonha} in the thirteenth century, with the primary


meaning “venomous secretion of certain animals” and a figurative connection to “malice”—in other words, the way that Old French speakers and their descendants used *venin* (venom). However, instead of using words from *pōtiō* to form a verb and practitioner noun for the act of poisoning the way Old French and Anglo-Norman speakers did, Portuguese speakers instead elaborated on their inherited Latin root *factīcius* (manufactured, prepared, artificial) to create *feitiço* (spell, charm, something used to seduce) and *feitiçaria* (sorcery). From the root verb *faciō*, whose dozens of meanings included “to make, build, construct, cause, achieve,” a *factīcius* thing was the product of a deliberate act of creation. Portuguese-speakers first recorded their use of *feitiço* and *feitiçaria* in a legal context, as part of anti-sorcery legislation from 1385 and 1403. As anthropologist Roger Sansi has explored, these terms carry within them both ambiguity over what is real and what has been falsely constructed, as well as an idea of sorcery as an act of seduction—a way of swaying others to one’s will. In the late middle ages Portuguese speakers crafted *feitiço* amulets from powerful objects, like broken mirrors and pieces of hangman’s rope, to protect themselves from potential danger and to influence their relationships with other people.

While most of the poison vocabulary that Europeans would use in the western Atlantic came from Latin roots, the Dutch words relating to *vergift* (poison) require a brief explanation. The Germanic root centers on the idea of a gift, of poison as a thing that is given. Old High German, Old Dutch, and Old English speakers—living in approximately the seventh to eleventh centuries—had a common ancestor of West Germanic, but they did not use their inherited

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23 Sansi, “Sorcery and Fetishism in the Modern Atlantic,” 22. Sansi’s chapter explores the transformation over time from *feitiço* in European discourse as a general term for “charm, spell” that was not specific to Africa to Africa-specific “fétiche” and “fetishism” by the nineteenth century.
poison/gift vocabulary in the same ways. Old English speakers used *gift* to refer to specifically to “payment for a wife”; speakers of descendant languages used *gift* in the senses of “the action of giving” and “the thing given.” They did not use *gift* words with any connotation of poison. 24 Old High German speakers had a verb *këpan/gëban* (to give) from which they derived a noun, *gift* (with a dual meaning of “gift/present” and “poison”), a more specific noun *firgift* (poison), a verb *farkepan* (to hand over, forgive, safeguard), and a verb *fargiftjan* (to inflict poison). The prefix *ver-* (Proto-Germanic *far-*) had several uses, including indicating an action resulting from the stem (e.g. from *këpan* as in “to give” to *farkepan* as in “to hand over, forgive, safeguard”). It could also be used to indicate a negative connotation—while *gift* could mean either gift or poison, *firgift* was exclusively negative. Middle High German speakers from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries continued to use *gëben, gift, vergift, vergëben,* and *vergiften*. They also developed a new practitioner noun *vergifter* (poisoner) and a new adjective *vergiftic* (poisonous, poisoned), from which they later created another verb *vergiftigen* (to poison). 25

Intriguingly, the ordinary Middle Dutch word for “poison” came not from a Germanic root, but was instead borrowed from French as *venijn* (poison, malice). Middle Dutch speakers did use their inherited noun *gift*—but only with the connotation of “donation” rather than “poison”—and the verb *vergheven* (to give away, remit, give forgiveness). The earliest recorded use of *vergif* (poison) in Dutch is the end of the Middle Dutch period (attestation 1485). Middle Dutch speakers in the late fifteenth century derived *vergif* from *vergheven* with the focus on giving/administering something. Early Modern Dutch speakers in the early sixteenth century began using their existing vocabulary in new ways, including *gif* (poisonous substance)—which

Middle Dutch speakers had not used to refer to poison. While Middle High German speakers had used a poison adjective, the first Dutch attestation of *vergiftig* (poisonous) was not until c. 1500. The fact that Middle Dutch speakers did not develop or borrow a practitioner noun, in contrast with Middle High German and Romance language speakers of the same period, perhaps suggests a lesser degree of concern with poisoners. However, the changes in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries point to a moment of transition towards increased interest and concern about poison.

At the same time that speakers of Romance and Germanic languages adapted and innovated their vocabulary of poison, sorcery, and gifts, intellectual elites of the middle ages engaged in debates over poisons, occult virtues, demonic and natural properties, and superstition. These elite debates did not necessarily line up with popular understandings of sorcery. While the general population conceived of magic as natural, i.e. making use of hidden powers in nature for practical ends like curing illnesses, intellectuals debated whether magic could be natural or if all magic was in fact demonic. These differences in discourse are apparent in sorcery accusations from the middle ages, where peasants often accused people with alleged magical skill in healing of causing physical harm or poisoning people with food or drink. As people understood these magical healers to be capable of using sorcery and charms as protective magic, the line between good and bad rested on the purpose for which they used their powers. In contrast, intellectuals focused on the origin of the power, whether divine, through

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27 “Magic” is a complex and much debated term for historians of magic, particularly for the problem of applying it to practices outside of a Western context. I am only using “magic” when discussing European discourse, because it useful for understanding European culture—but less useful outside of it. For reflections on the uses of the term “magic,” see Brian P. Copenhaver, *Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8, 37-38, 439.


natural properties, or demonic, in going beyond the bounds of nature—though they became increasingly concerned that all magical power could be demonic.\textsuperscript{30}

Medical theorists and physicians in the late middle ages and Renaissance also participated in this discourse of poison, sorcery, and healing. Fifteenth-century physicians conducted a similar debate to theologians and intellectual magicians in trying to understand the occult properties of poisons. Central to this debate was whether poisons should be understood with the Greek idea \textit{pharmakon}—where both medicines and poisons could be helpful or harmful, depending on the action and dosage—or the Latin \textit{venenum}—with poison as a separate and explicitly harmful substance with connotations of malevolent sorcery.\textsuperscript{31} Venom also permeated discussions of gender and the human body. In medieval medical theory, women’s bodies were inverted, inferior, and even poisonous versions of men’s. The idea of women as physically poisonous dated back to Pliny, whose description of the negative effects of contact with menstruating women continued to reverberate in late medieval Europe.\textsuperscript{32} A popular medical book from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century described women as “so full of venom in their time of menstruation that they poison animals by their glance.”\textsuperscript{33}

Europeans further elaborated their gendered discourse of poisonous women during the early modern witch trials. A major development in late fifteenth-century theory on witchcraft shifting the nature of the crime from causing physical harm to Devil worship made the witch

\textsuperscript{30} Kieckhefer, \textit{Magic in the Middle Ages}, 12, 14-15, 184, 199. In developing theories of magic, intellectuals in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance also increasingly drew upon classical and Arabic sources. See Copenhaver, \textit{Magic in Western Culture}, 24, 232, 236, 444; Kieckhefer, \textit{Magic in the Middle Ages}, “Chapter 6 Arabic Learning and the Occult Sciences.”


trials possible; in the eyes of the law, witches were no longer merely felons but heretics. European elites associated witchcraft with women based on the idea that the Devil chose women as followers more often than men due to their more sinful nature. The gap between popular and clerical concerns widened, as the former continued to consider witches as primarily causes of physical harm, whose actions could be combated with practical counter-magic, while the latter considered witches as idolaters and counter-magic used against them as inherently demonic. Significantly, devil worship and the elaborate Sabbath rituals at which witches allegedly gathered was usually absent in initial depositions and accusations from neighbors, and only come up in interrogations and confessions extracted under torture. Prosecutions at the height of the trials in the late sixteenth century often swept up local “cunning folk,” as theoretically only demonic action could account for their cures.

In addition to and often in conjunction with witchcraft, Europeans gendered poison as a female crime. Poison and witchcraft were related: witch-hunting manuals, including the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) and *Daemonolatreiae libri tres* (1595), described witches learning how to make poisons from their pacts with the Devil. Fears of female witches—and their alleged skills in poisoning—were partially fears of the devil inverting a ‘natural order’ by giving women power. Early modern poison accusations and discourses of poison in the public imagination centered on the idea of women poisoning their husbands or romantic rivals. The

35 Clark, *Thinking With Demons*, 110-111, 133, see entirety of “Chapter 8 Women and Witchcraft.”
38 On cunning-folk in England, see Davies, *Cunning-folk*, 12-13. For a general discussion, see Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 457-459, 465, see entirety of “Chapter 31 Popular Magic” and “Chapter 32 Superstition.”
41 Clark, *Thinking With Demons*, 133. See the entirety of “Chapter 8 Women and Witchcraft.”
Medea myth loomed large in seventeenth-century French popular culture, and the idea of poison wielding wives even appeared in new dictionaries. Jean Nicot’s *Thresor de la language françoyse* (1606), compiled together from multiple editions of sixteenth-century dictionaries, made direct connections between sorcery and poison as well as between poison and women. Under the verb *empoisonner* (to poison), Nicot demonstrated the passive with the example “empoisonné par sa femme” (poisoned by his wife). Thomas Elyot included in his 1538 English/Latin dictionary an entry *Venenarię mulieres*, “women that do sel [sic] poison.” In English law the murder of a husband by a wife through poison or other means was a form of “petit treason.”

While European witchcraft trials gradually declined in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and there had been far fewer witchcraft trials in Portugal than in places like France or Germany, the gendered discourse on women, witchcraft, and poison that Europeans had created persisted long after they stopped putting witches on trial and beyond the major areas of witch hunting. The connection is strongly evident in the vernacular dictionaries of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. In the first dictionary of the Portuguese language, a massive work of eight volumes written over the 1710s and 20s and published in 1728, Raphael Bluteau included not only definitions but short essays and numerous citations with many of the

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45 Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America*, 52.
46 Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 1, 19-21, 214-215, 227-228. Furthermore, the end of formal trials did not mean the end of concern about witchcraft and sorcery. Ankarloo and Clark make this point succinctly: long after the trials “ordinary Europeans went on thinking and acting in terms of maleficium…they continued to diagnose bewitchment, identify witches, take counter-measures, consult unwitching specialists, and recognize in their own lives and in the lives of others the relevance of magic to matters of love, riches, and good health.” Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, “Introduction,” in Ankarloo and Clark, eds. *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), ix.
words. His entries for *feiticeira* (female sorcer) and *feiticeiro* (male sorcerer) and associated words are particularly illuminating. First, Bluteau firmly linked *feiticeiros/as*, *feitiçaria*, and, *feitiços* with poison by translating them into Latin with his examples as *veneficus*, *veneficium*, and *venenum*—words from a different root that suggest “sorcerer-poisoner” as a more accurate translation of *feiticeiro/a* for the early eighteenth century. In a lengthy definition, Bluteau pondered why there were so many more women sorcerer-poisoners than men, and theorized that as women were “naturally more vengeful and envious” and “with more curious malice study the means to satisfy these passions,” they could be more easily taken by demons and become *feiticeiras*. In contrast, in the entry on *feiticeiros*, Bluteau emphasized not interpersonal conflicts and passions, but stories of famous men using “Diabolical Arts”—making an implicit or explicit pact with demons to have power over nature. While the theory of demonic agency necessary for going beyond the bonds of nature held, these difference in definition separated sorcery between female acts of vengeance and envy from a position of weakness and male acts of powerful men seeking greater power over nature.47

Continuities in the gendered connections between kinds of sorcery-poison beyond the witch trails are also evidence in Portuguese and French discussions of love magic. João Curvo Semedo, author of a 1707 Portuguese pharmacopeia, discussed “homens enfeytiçados” (bewitched man)—or more accurately, but very inelegantly, “ensorceried-poisoned” men—affected by the love magic of women “fearful that they [the men] will leave them,” as a common and serious medical problem. These women “secure[d]” their men and altered their behavior by putting various substances in their food and drink, most potently menstrual blood. Echoing physicians from the middle ages, Semedo went on to describe menstrual blood as a substance “so

poisonous, and prejudicial” that it could cause “a thousand…pitiful symptoms” of madness, furies, fears, and tears.\(^{48}\) In France, the “cultural script” of poison, to borrow Lynn Wood Mollenauer’s term, in the late seventeenth century focused on women using poisons and potions, with ingredients like menstrual blood, to make men fall or stay in love with them—a form of female control over men that was considered deeply threatening to the social order. While both men and women purchased love magic, the popular imagination of love magic and poisoners in seventeenth century France was heavily gendered female. The most sensational example of such cases was the “Affair of the Poisons” in Louis XIV’s court that lasted from 1677 to 1682 and involved nearly four hundred suspects. The case centered on a network of noblewomen commissioning love magic from a Parisian sorceress. Tied up in this case were further accusations of the sorceress’ sale of deadly poisons made from toads to unscrupulous heirs wishing to gain their inheritance faster, as well as sacrilege in the creation of charms that were imbued with power through rituals performed by rogue priests.\(^{49}\)

The eighteenth century was a period of flux in both European medical theory and ideas about poison. European intellectuals, physicians, and patients discussed medicine with competing and overlapping miasmatic models of disease, emerging ideas on the hydraulic bodily system where cures aimed to promote flow within the body, and the older Galenic model based on creating balance between the humors through cures primarily involving bleeding and purging.\(^{50}\) In the mid to late eighteenth century, they also began discussing physiology in new ways, with what Roy Porter has called “biological materialism.” In this conception, the


mechanical body worked through the responses of fibers in muscles and organs to external stimuli, operating like pulleys or strings. It is not a coincidence that during this same period Europeans began enthusiastically publishing treatises specifically dedicated to understanding poison, treatises that were swiftly translated, circulated, and published in multiple editions. The authors of these treatises built upon and cited the works of each other as they conducted experiments on viper venom, tested counter-poisons, and offered up theories both defining poison and attempting to explain how poison worked. These works focused on poison were in conversation with observations and descriptions of drugs from the wider Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, networks of knowledge that included royal societies, colonial observers, and the authors of new pharmacopeias synthesizing medical knowledge and materia medica. Much of the emerging work on poisons and cures grew from an important seventeenth-century shift European natural philosophers made in their ideas about the occult, from defining it as that which was unobservable by human senses to that which was currently unknown, but could be made knowable. The mission of the authors of eighteenth-century poison treatises was to make the hidden functioning of poison and antidotes known through experimentation.

It is important to emphasize how entangled these authors of these poison treatises were, as they worked and read across imperial lines. For example, João (or Jean) Vigier, the author of a major 1716 Portuguese pharmacopeia, was a descendant of French and Portuguese parents who lived and worked in Lisbon. Italian physicist Felice Fontana, author of *Traité sur le vénin de la vipere* (1781), spent the 1770s traveling Europe and conducting research with the Royal Society

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52 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 262.
53 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 12, 16.
in London, and chose to write and publish his work in French. Mathieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila (or Mateu Josep Bonaventura Orfila), author of the enormously influential *Traité des poisons* (1814) also had transnational connections as a Spanish chemist who moved to the faculty of medicine in Paris, becoming a French citizen during the Napoleonic wars and later the royal physician to Louis XVIII. Even without personal transnational peregrinations, the ideas and works of these authors spread far beyond their language and nation of origin through numerous translations and editions. In addition to intergenerational reading of each other’s work—as Fontana cited English physician Richard Mead, and Orfila cited Fontana—contemporary Portuguese, English, French, and Dutch natural philosophers adopted shared language and methods as part of a multidirectional feedback. Even authors living in rival empires who were not ‘supposed’ to talk with one another, like Protestant members of the Royal Society and Portuguese Jesuit natural philosophers in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, participated in direct exchanges of knowledge—sometimes in secret.

European poison treatise authors of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries focused their efforts on developing a universal theory for how poisons work, relying primarily on experiments with vipers. In doing, so they tried to square new and old ideas, combining theories on the mechanical body with Galenic humors, and examining viper venom under a microscope while opining on the connection between the venom’s efficacy and the serpent’s malevolent passions. French chemist Moyse Charas proposed the latter theory, connecting the “force and the

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54 He had published an earlier pamphlet in Italian in 1765, but dramatically expanded the work based on his experiments conducted in the 1770s. Information on Fontana’s life from “Preface of the French Editor” to the first English edition. Felix Fontana, *Treatise on the Venom of the Viper; on the American Poisons; and on the Cherry Laurel and some other Vegetable Poisons*, Translated from the original French by Joseph Skinner (London: Printed for J. Murray, No. 32 Fleet-Street, 1787), vol. 1, i-ii.

55 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 246, 265-271. For more on these secret exchanges, see entirety of “Chapter 5 Occult Virtues: Anglo-Iberian Pharmaceutical Exchanges, 1650-1755.”
action of [the viper’s] venom” coming from their emotional state.\textsuperscript{56} Mead developed his theory that all poisons were salts that operated by cutting up the stomach like “so many sharp Knives or Daggers” on the basis of his observations of the jagged crystalline appearance of dried viper venom under a microscope.\textsuperscript{57}

In their efforts to explain how specific poisons and cures worked, European authors of poison treatises often filtered the preternatural through the lens of contemporary scientific thought. As part of apothecary João Vigier’s monumental \textit{Pharmacopea Ulyssiponense, Galenica, e Chymica} (1716)—whose title alone points to the blending of early eighteenth-century medical traditions—he suggested a theory as to why amulets were effective “to cure fevers, or to resist poison”: being worn around the neck near the pulse, an amulet affected the body’s natural heat, causing a beneficial fermentation of the humors.\textsuperscript{58} In the 1702, 1729, and 1747 editions of \textit{A Mechanical Account of Poisons}, Richard Mead devoted an essay to the bite of the Italian tarantula, whose venom induced a delirium that could only be cured by vigorous dancing. In his explanation, upon entering nervous fluid, tarantula venom spreads to the muscles, where the heat of the climate caused it to ferment the “arterial Fluid” and act upon “the Organs or Passions of the Mind.” Furthermore, he theorized that the cure of dancing worked both through the beneficial production of sweat and the movement of air vibrations from the music into the ear canal, which loosened up coagulated blood. Referencing Giovanni Borelli’s 1670 work on percussion, Mead argued that the process of breaking up the blood to restore normal flow through vibrations was the same as vibrations from a particular pitch shattering a glass—

\textsuperscript{57} Richard Mead, \textit{A Mechanical Account of Poisons in Several Essays} (London: Printed by R. J. for Ralph Smith, 1702), 111-112.
\textsuperscript{58} João Vigier, \textit{Pharmacopea Ulyssiponense, Galenica, e Chymica, que contem os Principios, Difinicoens, e Termos geraes de huma, & outré Pharmacia: & hum Lexicon universal dos termos Pharmaceuticos Galenicas, de que se use neste Reyno, & virtudes, & dosis dos medicamentos Chymicos} (Lisbon: Na Officina de Pascoal da Sylva, Impressor de S. Magestade, 1716), 44.
like individual glasses, individual patients might require different music to hit the right note.\textsuperscript{59} Passages such as these reveal the efforts of European intellectuals to make the unknown knowable by drawing on ideas of the day, whether new experiments on vibrations, or older but still very much in use ideas about the humors. As I will explore in Chapter 3, eighteenth-century European slaveholders in the Americas would also try and make sense of sorcery-poisonings by incorporating them into their ideas about how the world worked.

In addition to recent scientific works and ancient authorities, eighteenth-century poison treatise authors also worked recent anecdotes of poisons and cures from Africa and the Americas into their theories. Richard Mead was unusually conscientious for his time in providing citations in each revised edition of his work—a comparison of his sources and the context in which he used them across the 1702, 1729, and 1747 editions reveals a multi-stranded braid of authority on poison and medicine in the early to mid eighteenth century. While, unsurprisingly, Mead cited Galen and Hippocrates about a dozen times each in each edition, he increasingly cited authorities with direct experience in the Africa or the Americas: for example, Father Francisco Hernández’s 1615 treatise on the Mexican tarantula (all editions); New England alchemist George Starkey on his “Pacific Pill” cure (1729, 1747); Portuguese merchant Duarte Lopes’ \textit{Report of the Kingdom of Congo} on the Kongoese eating vipers to cure diseases (1729, 1747); and Dutch naturalist Peter Kolb’s 1719 work on the use of poison arrows near Cape Town (1747).\textsuperscript{60} Mead also cited several “personal communications” between himself and anonymous surgeons living in Guinea and Virginia—the latter reporting knowledge of how to suck poison out of a rattlesnake bite learned from indigenous peoples—as well as a surgeon living in London on his own experiences

\textsuperscript{59} Mead, \textit{A Mechanical Account of Poisons in Several Essays}, 73-74; Mead continued to include this section in the 1729 and 1747 editions of his work.

\textsuperscript{60} For more on Starky’s contributions to alchemy and chemistry in Europe, see William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, \textit{Alchemy Tried in the Fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the Fate of Helmontian Chymistry} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
with rattlesnakes. Knowledge about rattlesnakes, poisoned arrows, and nature in Africa and the Americas for European authors like Mead—a Royal Society Fellow and personal physician to King George II who did not personally venture beyond Europe—had a polycentric creation; as knowledge from Africans, Amerindians, and European creoles on the natural world influenced and helped create European knowledge and ways of knowing about the world.

Changes in European ideas about poison were also connected to the emergence of a robust global drug trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as drugs and associated knowledge of their use also circulated in the Atlantic World and beyond. Bioprospecters sought out new drugs to adopt into the European *materia medica*, “drug” being widely defined in the early modern period to include not only plant-based but also mineral, animal, and chemical substances—from tobacco to bezor stones to quinoa. New drugs and information on how to use them appeared not only in botanical treatises, but also in manuscript medical recipes and the popular genre of household medical books. For example, in the dozens of examples of manuscripts of medical charms and recipes collected by Hans Sloane, two from the early seventeenth century began including plantains—used by Africans on both sides of the Atlantic—for treating venomous bites and stings.

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62 Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 6-7, 314-315. In addition to Parrish’s work, there is a robust literature re-examining the emergence of natural history and Enlightenment knowledge as a product of the Atlantic world rather than something created by Europeans alone and transferred to the Americas. For two recent examples, see Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean*; Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves*.

63 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 29-30, 36, 47. Breen revises and expands on Schiebinger’s work on bioprospecting and botany by examining the range of early modern “drugs” of interest to bioprospecters beyond plants and by including the Portuguese Empire as a crucial player in Atlantic bioprospecting. Compare Breen’s “Chapter 2 ‘To Make Discoveries of Drugs’: Bioprospecting in Seventeenth-Century Amazonia” with Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, “Chapter 2 Bioprospecting.”

64 MS 1017, British Library (BL) Sloane Manuscripts, Medicine Charms and Receipts, 1; MS 723, BL Sloane Manuscripts, Medicine Charms and Receipts, 16v. The anonymous 1609 manuscript is particularly fascinating as it was written in a unique system of runes—very helpfully decoded with a key by an archivist in 1829.
In the early eighteenth century, several Portuguese apothecaries and chemists connected to networks of knowledge across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans began producing large vernacular pharmacopeias cataloging these drugs as manuals for practical use. While the idea of a pharmacopeia was not new—quite a few had been published in Latin in the seventeenth century and earlier—the shift to the vernacular by these writers in the early eighteenth century unleashed a wave of widely read and reprinted works. Both Semedo and Vigier wrote on bezoars—stones taken from a goat’s skull that authors claimed could cure any poison—and snakestones from the East Indies that allegedly had the power, when applied to the bite of a venomous snake, to suck out the poison. In addition to bezoars and snakestones, these Portuguese writers included specific drugs from the Americas. Semedo had entries in his catalog for the Virginian snake root as a treatment for rattlesnake bites, and the “Tambuape” and “Jamvarandim” roots used by indigenous peoples in Bahia as counter poisons. Likewise, Vigier described the powdered beak of the horned screamer as “highly esteemed” in the Amazon as a counter poison, and compared the usefulness of powdered bison horn for treating poisons to that of the unicorn. Both Semedo and Vigier also respectively discussed reports of people in Angola and Brazil eating the flesh of venomous snakes to protect against venom from future bites; both also discussed people incorporating pieces of the Angolan snake or, in the case of Brazil, a venomous spider called nhamdui, in bolsas (charms, amulets) around the neck for protection.

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66 See D. Caetano de Santo António, Pharmacopoea Lusitana: Methodo Pratico de Preparar & compor os medicamentos na forma Galenica com todas as receitas mais uzuais, Facsimile of 1704 first edition, ed. João Rui Pita (Lisbon: Edições Minerva, 2000). Caetano’s work, the first of its kind, was swiftly followed by Semedo’s 1707 Observaçoens Medicas Doutrinaes and João Vigier’s Pharmacopea Ulyssiponense; the first two respectively went into five and four editions in the first half of the eighteenth century.
67 Semedo, Observaçoens Medicas, 2, 8-9; Vigier, Pharmacopea Ulyssiponense, 48, 398-401. Rumors of the snakestone’s efficacy in the seventeenth century were so great that a curious Queen Catherine commissioned Robert Boyle to perform experiments with one on a viper-bitten dog to test its efficacy as an antidote; Boyle’s results were inconclusive. See Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 260-261.
68 Semedo, Observaçoens Medicas, 22, 25; Vigier, Pharmacopea Ulyssiponense, 393, 402.
against illnesses.\textsuperscript{69}

Curiously, while European authors incorporated anecdotes and examples of drugs and poisons from Africa and the Americas into their work, the wave of eighteenth-century poison trials in the slave societies of the western Atlantic is conspicuously absent from their poison discourse. However, authors of poison treatises and pharmacopeias were keenly interested in finding useful counter poisons. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, these authors were especially interested in antidotes with universal properties made from exotic ingredients. Semedo reported Jesuits in India had developed the “Pedra Cordeal Compost”—“effective against all kinds” of poison—that combined unnamed ingredients with bezoar stones, boiled in water infused with Virginian snake root. Likewise, the Jesuits in Bahia made their own version of “Triaga”—\textit{theriac de Mithridate}, an all purpose antidote traditionally composed of sixty-four ingredients that sold for very high prices in early modern European apothecary shops—from various local plants, roots, herbs, and fruits that was allegedly effective against all kinds of poison except corrosives (e.g. arsenic, mercury sublimate).\textsuperscript{70} This exception is intriguing and suggestive of later eighteenth-century trends focusing on specific antidotes for specific poisons.

Discussions of poison in treatises from the mid to late eighteenth century suggest a gradual shift in theories about poison, as European poison treatise authors gave greater primacy to knowledge created in European labs through experimentation. These authors in the mid eighteenth century built upon earlier works, though with a much greater emphasis on recording their own experiments. It was not that experimentation itself was new, but rather that stories from the ancients and second-hand accounts from Africa and the Americas had much less

\textsuperscript{69} Semedo, \textit{Observaçoens Medicas}, 11; Vigier, \textit{Pharmacopea Ulyssiponense} 402-403, 433. Neither Semedo nor Vigier provided citations, but Smedo’s description of snake eating in Angola is so close to that of Richard Mead’s that it likely came from the same source: Duarte Lopes’ \textit{Report of the Kingdom of Congo} (translated from Italian to English in 1597). See Mead, \textit{A Mechanical Account of Poisons in Several Essays} (1702), 32.

\textsuperscript{70} Semedo, \textit{Observaçoens Medicas} 3-4, 17; Mollenauer, \textit{Strange Revelations}, 94.
authority than they had had for authors like Mead. While ancient authorities had made up about one third of Mead’s citations in both the 1702 and 1747 editions of his work, for Felice Fontana’s 1781 treatise that number had dropped to 5%—the vast majority of the works Fontana did cite had been published in the eighteenth century, and about a quarter had been published in the past six years.\(^71\) The basic structure of Fontana’s treatise was a collection of over 6,000 experiments he had personally conducted, focused primarily, as the title suggests, on viper venom.\(^72\) In one series of experiments, Fontana tested several of the “many boasted remedies” against viper venom, finding theriac, electricity, and sucking the poison out with the mouth to each be ineffective.\(^73\) He also attempted to resolve debates from earlier poison treatise authors Mead and Francesco Redi on subjects like the flavor of viper venom, noting that “these contradictions reduced me to the philosophical necessity of tasting the venom myself.”\(^74\)

Instead of relying on reports from others, as Mead had, Fontana incorporated his own experiments with poisonous plants of the Americas into his research. Fontana specifically conducted experiments on poison ivy (\textit{Toxicodendron radicans}) from North America and \textit{ticunas}—a plant-based arrow poison used by Yameo speakers in Amazonian Peru.\(^75\) The story

\(^71\) Mead, \textit{A Mechanical Account of Poisons in Several Essays}, First Edition (1702), Fourth Edition, Corrected (1747); Felice Fontana, \textit{Traité sur le vénin de la vipere, sur les poisons américains, sur le laurier-cerise et sur quelques autres poisons végétaux} (Florence, 1781). About 75% of Fontana’s citations were published in the eighteenth century, 45% were post-1750, and 24% were post 1775. By 1814 the percentage of ancient sources in the citations would drop to 1% in Mathieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila’s comprehensive work. See Mathieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila, \textit{Traité des poisons: tirs des Régnes mineral, vegetal et animal, ou toxocologie générale, considérée sous les rapports de la physiologie, de la pathologie et de la medicine légale} (Paris: Chez Crochard, 1814). Fontana did cite Mead himself, but in the context of challenging his work on vipers.

\(^72\) Fontana, \textit{Treatise on the Venom of the Viper}, v.

\(^73\) Fontana, \textit{Traité sur le vénin de la vipere}, vol. 2 “Chapter 1 Examen des remèdes pratiqués contre la morsure de la Vipère.”


\(^75\) The rashes Fontana experienced when handling the poison ivy were apparently so bad that he abandoned his experiments with it in defeat: “Thus have I dearly paid for my skepticism [sic] and want of precaution, in becoming, myself, the subject of my experiments.” Fontana, \textit{Treatise on the Venom of the Viper}, 181.
behind the latter is particularly illustrative of the kinds of Atlantic networks of knowledge poison
treatise authors were engaged in: having read Charles Marie de la Condamine’s 1745 report on
ticunas from his travels along the Amazon, Fontana had the opportunity in London to conduct
experiments with “American arrows well preserved, and well covered with poison,” supplied by
a friend and Royal Society member.\textsuperscript{76} He saw these experiments as necessary, as he trusted
neither Condamine’s observations nor “the doubtful relation of some native of that country.”\textsuperscript{77}
For some European intellectuals like Fontana, by the mid to late eighteenth century the personal
experiences of European travelers and creoles in the Americas and their Amerindian or African
interlocutors counted for far less than experiments conducted by professionals in a laboratory.
This attitude stood in stark contrast with how European creoles in the Americas saw themselves
as unique contributors to knowledge—often obtained by African and Amerindian informants—to
scientific discourse in Europe.\textsuperscript{78}

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Europeans began talking about
poison in new ways. The development of chemical means of isolating alkaloids and synthesizing
new drugs in the early decades of the nineteenth century were certainly a contributing factor.\textsuperscript{79}
Some of the changes in European discourse around poison can be seen in subtle changes of
dictionary definitions and the examples used to illustrate them. The \textit{Dictionnaire de l’Académie
française} is an excellent source for tracking such changes among French speakers between the
first (1694), fourth (1762), and sixth (1835) editions. Between the 1694 and 1762 editions, the
academy dropped tobacco as an example under “poison,” while between the 1762 and 1835

\textsuperscript{76} Fontana, \textit{Traité sur le vénin de la vipere}, 2.84; Condamine, \textit{Relation abrégée d’un voyage fait dans l’interieur de
68, 1778.
\textsuperscript{77} Fontana, \textit{Traité sur le vénin de la vipere}, 2.86.
\textsuperscript{78} Parrish, \textit{American Curiosity}, especially “Chapter 3 Atlantic Correspondence Networks and the Curious Male
Colonial,” “Chapter 6 Indian Sagacity,” and “Chapter 7 African Magi, Slave Poisoners.” See also Iannini, \textit{Fatal
Revolutions}.
\textsuperscript{79} Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 129-130.
editions it changed the primary example for “contre-poison” from theriac to milk—used frequently by physicians like Orfila to induce vomiting as the first step of treatment in accidents.\textsuperscript{80} Under the entry for “empoisonner,” the 1835 edition included the new example: “He poisons himself with arsenic.”\textsuperscript{81} While both the 1694 and 1762 dictionaries discussed “vénéfice”—a word loaded with implications of sorcery in contemporary usage—as a “crime of poisoning…only used in criminal procedures,” by 1835 the academy had made a small but crucial change in saying that vénéfice “was only used in former criminal procedures.”\textsuperscript{82} Though small, each individual change contributed to a pattern where European elites increasingly discussed poison in new ways.

The discussion of poison in treatises and definitions of poison words in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries illustrate a shift towards a greater emphasis on criminal justice and forensics. While authors of poison treatises earlier in the eighteenth century had focused on trying to understand how poisons and venoms worked on the body—and by extension, how bodies worked—these treatises had a practical focus on medical jurisprudence. Samuel Farr, a Bristol physician, and William Dease, an Irish surgeon, respectively published treatises as educational pieces to improve the accuracy of autopsies and correct firmly held popular ideas about poison that could lead to false accusations.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (1835), 1:629. For more on changing discourses on suicide and poison in nineteenth-century Bahia, see Ferreira, Lucos e pecadores.
\textsuperscript{82} Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (1694) 2:621; Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (1762) 2:913; Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (1835) 2:915; “venefice,” TLFi (accessed 23 July 2016); Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française, 4:2438.
scientist, politician, immigrant to the United States, and close friend of Thomas Jefferson—compiled Farr, Dease, and essays from other British authors into an 1819 volume intended to teach medical and legal students at the budding University of Virginia, where Jefferson had asked Cooper to join the new faculty as a professor of natural science.  

Orfila’s multi-volume *Traité des poisons* was a significant turning point in that his work brought together the goals of medical jurisprudence with an effort to comprehensively catalog known poisons as the basis for a new field of “toxicology”—itself a newly coined word.  

Orfila described this new field as the widest of all branches of medicine, of interest to many including The Practitioner—always seeking way to “quickly ruin [poisons’] deadly action”—The Chemist—“Revolted by the crime of homicide” who seeks to help magistrates “punish the guilty”—and The Gentleman—who “[deplores] the fate of victims of negligence or scorn,” sympathizes with suicides, and feels “horror at the idea of the heinous assassin” who attacks in silence.  

First published in 1814, *Traité de poisons* was almost immediately translated into English, Italian, German, and Hungarian and went into three French editions in just over a decade; this work was so foundational to nineteenth-century toxicology that in the 1870s Émile Littré’s massive *Dictionnaire de la langue français* cited Orfila and his work as the primary foundation.
example for the word “toxicologie.” As with Farr and Dease, Orfila explicitly directed his work to the task of both training physicians to be able to identify and properly treat poisons in living patients, as well as to perform autopsies to identify causes of death. Like Farr, Dease, and other writers, Orfila was emphatically concerned with educating physicians who might be called to testify in criminal cases and with reinforcing and policing the boundaries of medical professionals.

What is striking about these works of medical jurisprudence is that they are each completely void of any discussion of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century poison trials of the western Atlantic. As part of his comprehensive catalog, Orfila did discuss several poisonous plants and local treatments from the Americas, including the guaco plant, used by Africans and indigenous peoples of New Grenada to treat snake bites, and the arrow poisons ticunas and curare from the Amazon and Orinoco; in each of these cases he cited the reports and experiments of others—including Fontana—without conducting his own. This treatment was in stark contrast with his extensive and personally conducted experiments on poisons of greater concern to him, especially mercury sublimate, arsenic, and antimony. Orfila did not mention any of the cases of enslaved or free people of African descent accused of poisoning in contemporary Suriname, Martinique, or elsewhere. The anecdotal cases Orfila cited to accompany his experiments were exclusively centered on cases in Europe, and frequently centered on accidents and suicides from Orfila’s practice as a physician: a toddler eating rat poison containing mercury sublimate; a tormented young woman putting arsenic in her soup; a

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87 Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, vol. 4, 2290.
89 Orfila, *Traité des poisons*, 1.1 Poisons mercuriels, 1.2 Poisons arsénicaux, 1.3 Poisons antimoniaux.
young man accidentally overdosing on opium. While stating a concern with homicide, Orfila gave very few examples of it in his case studies; in fact, he appears to have been perhaps more concerned with doctors claiming to have found poison when there was none or running their experiments poorly. Bizarrely, in one passage Orfila railed against the crime of secretly introducing a poisonous substance into the rectum of a cadaver with the intent of skewing the autopsy and framing an innocent man—“of all the crimes committed today, there is none which inspires as much horror.” European authors of these late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century poison treatises had their eyes fixed on Europe; the experiences of slaveholders, slaves, and medical practitioners of African descent in the ongoing poison trials of the western Atlantic were apparently not considered relevant enough for inclusion.

By the early nineteenth century, European discourse on poison had changed dramatically in some ways while maintaining continuity in others. Intellectual elites discussed ‘real’ poisons used to intentionally harm as those made by chemists with access to a laboratory, with poisonous plants primarily appearing only in stories of unfortunate accidents or anthropological curiosity. At the same time, poison accusations in Europe continued to frame poison as a crime of the weak committed to usurp power, a gendered idea rooted in discourses of witchcraft. Early modern Europeans brought these changes and continuities in their poison discourse with them when they crossed the Atlantic, and their ideas both informed and adapted to the ways they thought about slaves and poison.

92 In Victorian Britain female poisoners murdering their husbands were a staple in popular discourse and novels. See Randa Helfield, “Poisonous Plots: Women Sensation Novelists and Murderesses of the Victorian Period” Victorian Review 21, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 161-188.
Words and the ways past people used them to articulate their hopes, fears, and concerns are as essential to understanding ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery in West Africa as they are for Europe. In the words they developed to discuss harm caused by sorcery and efforts to prevent or treat it, people in West Africa made strong links between poisoning and emotions. Like Europe, West Africa was part of the Atlantic World; evidence suggests that people in West Africa became increasingly concerned with poison-witchcraft over the Atlantic period in connection with the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. As with Europe and Europeans, the western Atlantic was not the first or only site of changing ideas on poison.

Unlike for Europe and West Central Africa, I am not currently able to sketch West Africans’ changes to their ideas about poison through their words over the longue durée. Without the written sources that make European philology possible, or the extensive published historical linguistic records of Bantu languages as I have for West Central Africa, I only have the sources to speak to changes in West Africa over the early modern period. My research for this section draws from a combination of three kinds of sources: descriptions of West Africa from European observers, analyses of word roots from dictionaries compiled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and twentieth-century ethnography. As with all historical sources, they each have their own flaws. I cannot guarantee that people used the same words in nineteenth and twentieth-century dictionaries or ethnographic work as they did in the Atlantic period, nor can I—without historical linguistic research—pinpoint the antiquity of word innovations. However, the

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94 As an exception, see Fields-Black, Deep Roots.
95 I am not using this recent anthropological work to fill in the past with an ethnographic present; rather, this ethnographic work is useful for corroborating evidence from other sources and for putting more “meat” on dictionary definitions.
conceptual connections between the roots of recently attested words can suggest important insights into the ways past peoples of West Africa discussed poison. There are several challenges to using European narratives as well, as these observers filtered what they saw about poisoning and sorcery through their own ideas. Furthermore, Europeans visiting Africa had often read and were influenced by earlier European accounts. To help mitigate these challenges, I am only using first-hand accounts. Recognizing these limitations, I compare and triangulate between my sources.

While there were dozens of languages spoken between Senegambia and the Bight of Biafra in the early modern period, the main languages of interest for West African peoples connected to the transatlantic slave trade fall into four related subgroups of the Niger-Congo language family: Atlantic (Wolof, Fula, Limba), Mande (Bambara, Malinke), Kwa (Akan, Gbe—with recent divergences like Ewe, Fon, Aja, and Mahi), and Western Benue-Congo (Yoruba, Igbo). Linguists working in Africa have long debated the classification of these languages, but the modern consensus has the Atlantic and Mande groups diverging from Proto-Mande-Atlantic-Congo at a much earlier period than Kwa and West Benue-Congo, which were more closely related as they shared a mother language, East Volta-Congo.

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Geographically, in the early modern period speakers of languages in the Atlantic family lived in Senegambia and the Sierra Leone coastal regions—with Fula speaking nomadic pastoral communities extending along the Niger river valley; speakers of Mande languages lived along the sahel in the West African interior, speakers of Kwa languages lived along the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin; and speakers of languages from the West-Benue-Congo family lived in the Bight of Biafra and the interior of what is now Nigeria.\textsuperscript{99}

With important environmental differences between narrow bands of ecological zones from the sahel to the savannas to the coastal forests, the history of West Africa in the centuries prior to European arrival and in the Atlantic period was one of cross-cultural connections and

\textsuperscript{98} Based on Voyages Database (accessed 15 February 2019).
\textsuperscript{99} Williamson and Blench, “Niger-Congo,” 18, 21, 27, 30-31.
trade. Caravans run by Mande speakers centered on the large trading cities of the sahel intersected with riverine networks, exchanging desert salt for gold and kola seeds. In forging these trading relationships, people developed ways of accommodating and incorporating traveling merchants.\textsuperscript{100} Furthermore, many people were multi-lingual and interacted frequently with other groups. As Toby Green argues in his work on Senegambia, discussions of creolization in the Atlantic must begin by recognizing the internal connections between West Africans, who were far from hermetically sealed off from each other in the centuries before European arrival.\textsuperscript{101}

During the era of the transatlantic slave trade, violence from wars and raiding created new kinds of “creolization” through the formation of refugee communities. Some, like the collection of peoples between the kingdoms of Dahomey and Oyo in the early eighteenth century who began calling themselves Mahi, created new languages and practices in this shatter zone.\textsuperscript{102} This interconnectedness of West Africa, despite regional differences, is important to understanding overlaps and shared ideas about health, healing, and affliction.

Many of the rituals observed by Europeans in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries centered on the maintenance of public health, often in relation to particularly significant seasonal events, or in response to crises such as disease or war. In the days before the rice harvest in Sestro in the early 1680s, French slave trader Jean Barbot observed a public ritual of sacrificing and feeding hens to “their fetiche,” a small shrine with a thick human shaped

\textsuperscript{100}George E. Brooks, \textit{Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 49-50, 53-54. See entirety of “Chapter 4 Mande Caravan Routes Linking Senegambia, the Upper Guinea Coast, and the Malaguetta Coast,” and “Chapter 5 Biafada-Sapi, Banyun-Bak, and Kruan Coastwise and Riverine Networks.”

\textsuperscript{101}Toby Green, \textit{Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17. See entirety of “Chapter 1 Culture, Trade and Diaspora in Pre-Atlantic Western Africa.”

\textsuperscript{102}Sweet, \textit{Domingos Álvares}, 13-17. See entirety of “Chapter 1 Dahomey.” For more on the heterogeneity of Dahomey itself, see Law, \textit{Ouidah}, 74-75. Green’s work on Senegambia tracks changes in creolization from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth centuries, including between the Kassanké and New Christian refugees from Spain. See Green, \textit{Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa}.
...statue. Likewise, Willem Bosman, a Dutch West India Company merchant living on the Gold Coast from 1688 to 1702, described divinatory rituals and sacrifices conducted by priests there before important public decisions on wars or major travel. Perhaps the most well known public healing cults surrounded Dengbe the snake in pre-Dahomean Ouidah. Dengbe was one of many vodun—frequently interpreted by these European observers as a god or devil, but more accurately described as a force or power capable of impacting the lives of the living. In addition to an annual pilgrimage to the snake house by the king of Ouidah, Bosman also described the seasonal confinement of young women there who had been afflicted with “madness” during the harvest time. In times of fevers, people in late seventeenth-century Ouidah also made offerings to specific powerful vodun trees to restore health. Public sacrifices of animals to “feed” benevolent spirits and soothe malevolent ones, predominantly conducted and performed by men, were also central to practices among Igbo speakers in the Bight of Biafra.

Specialist practitioners, usually referred to as “priests” by Europeans, performed both these seasonal rituals and therapeutic healings. At least in late seventeenth-century Ouidah, these practitioners included both men and women, though among Igbo speakers in the Bight of Biafra they were usually men. While in Rio Sestro, Barbot met and spoke with a local priest, who

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103 Jean Barbot, Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1687-1712, P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, eds. (London: Hakluyt Society),1: 274-275. Barbot plagiarized freely in the original edition of A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea (1732). Editors Hair, Jones, and Law have painstakingly combed through and identified which parts of his narrative were original observations and which were copied—I am only using the original observations.

104 Willem Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and they Ivory Coasts (reprint of the 1705 first English edition) (London: Ballantyne Press, 1907), 151-152.


106 Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, 368-371. For more on the destruction of the snake house during the Dahomean conquest of Ouidah, see William Snelgrave, A New Account of some Parts of Guinea, and the Slave Trade (London: James, John, and Paul Knapton, at the Crown in Ludgate-Street, 1734), 10-12.

107 Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, 382.

108 Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 52, 56.

109 Bosman, A New and Accurate Description, 383-384; Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 62.
was “acquainted with medicinal plants and acted as a doctor to all his parishioners.” People only sought out the services of this “greatly respected” medical practitioner “on occasions when they felt in peril.” Europeans and locals alike sought out cures by these ritual practitioners because they were often effective. Bosman begrudgingly admitted as much in his description of practitioners’ successful use of the Gold Coast pharmacopeia in ways that seemed counter-intuitive to Galenic medicine: “how contradictory and improper soever these Med’cines may seem…I have seen several of our Country Men cured by them, when our own Physicians were at a loss what to do.” These practitioners on the Gold Coast charged some form of payment for their services, paid by the relatives of the patient and proportional to their means.

West Africans discussed these practitioners as people particularly gifted in communications with the spirit world, as divination to determine causes and cures of illnesses were a central part of healing. The connection between healing, sorcery, and divination was embedded in the words people used to discuss these practitioners. Bosman referred to a “Fetichee” or “Priest” he observed on the Gold Coast as “confoe”—o-kòmfò in late nineteenth-century Akan. Akan speakers very likely derived this term from their verb kom (to be possessed with a “fetish” or to perform the practice of a “fetish man”) along with related words for the state of being possessed, a revelation, and a child born through the help of a “fetish.” Twentieth-century Fon speakers similarly discussed bokónô practitioners as diviners, healers, and

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110 Barbot, Barbot on Guinea, 275.
111 Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, 225. Bosman further postulated that perhaps African medicines worked better on Europeans in Africa due to changes in the European physical constitution from time in the climate.
112 Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, 221-222.
113 Walter Hawthorne, From Africa to Brazil: Culture, Identity, and an Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 210; Sweet, Domingos Álvares, 26; Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 62; Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery,” 245.
interpreters of *fa* (spirit and art of divination). In the Bight of Biafra, Igbo speakers used the term *diaba* to describe specialists with a strong connection to spirits and expertise in both herbal knowledge and divination. These practitioners were people of morally neutral power, who could choose to use their power for good or bad ends.

Speakers of different West African languages innovated and used the same roots within their respective languages to discuss both “medicine” and “poison”—often connecting them through a discussion of form, such as powders. For Fon and Ewe speakers, the very ancient root -*ti*- (tree) plays a prominent role. In Fon, the noun *àtí* was used with modifications to discuss all trees, and was also specifically used to discuss “medicinal powder made with plants” and “poison.” Speakers of both languages used words from this same root to discuss medical practitioners and the charms that they made with -*ti*- medicine in them. When Akan speakers used *aduru* to discuss both medicines and poisons, the connection was in the noun’s primary meaning of “powder.” In other words, medicines and poisons were essentially both powdered things. Igbo speakers used the noun *juju*—from the verb *a-juju* (to ask) and represented as *ọgwù* in modern Igbo—as an umbrella term for things with power, from shrines to medicines to poisons.

In modern Igbo, this word is part of the compound verbs –*gwọ ọgwù* (to prepare medicine), -*ko ọgwù* (to practice sorcery against), and –*ru ọgwù* (to neutralize effect of poison). A compound noun from modern Igbo suggests the kinds of afflictions that might have required

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118 Segurola, *Dictionnaire fon-français*, 65-66; Diedrich Westermann, *Evefiala or Ewe-English Dictionary: Gbesela YeYe or English-Ewe Dictionary*, Second Edition (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1973), vol. 1, 231-232. Fon speakers use this same root in a compound with *vodun* for the word *àtimévodu* (group of “fetiches” living in a tree). For example, in Dahomey leopards, which hunt from trees, were considered powerful *àtimévodu* in particular association with the King of Dahomey. In Zora Neale Hurston’s 1927 interviews with Cudjoe Lewis, a Yoruba-speaking man enslaved and smuggled to Alabama in 1859, Lewis described an episode from his childhood when a man was put to death for taking the whiskers from a dead leopard, as they were “poisonous” and belonged to a king. Hurston, *Barracoon*, 26-28.
such treatment: *ogwụ üde* (native medicine prepared and stored in a bottle with palm kernel oil, used for curing convulsions, poisoning).

What did people in early modern West Africa do with their medicines and poisons? One common practice was the use of empowerment objects—created and ritually consecrated by specialists—to achieve specific ends or prevent specific misfortunes. According to European observers from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on their conversations with local informants, people commissioned objects ranging from pouches worn on the body to small statues with specific powers. Bosman described people on the Gold Coast in the 1680s and 90s both wearing “trifles” that were “consecrated or conjured” by “priests” and placing such objects in the rooms of the sick to help them recover. The fact that some Europeans on the coast considered this remedy efficacious and adopted these practices shocked Bosman. Several decades later, British Royal Navy surgeon John Atkins described different “fetishes” or “Gregries” from Sierra Leone to the Gold Coast, querying his local informants on their composition and uses. In Sierra Leone, people told him that they wore and kept amulets tied to their houses and boats to defend from miscarriages and other misfortunes, while Atkins’ friend and business partner at Cape Coast Castle explained to him that the multiple “fetish” that he wore and paid for from a “Fetish-man” were “to protect from Dangers, or recover from Sickness.”

According to John Matthews, a Royal Navy lieutenant in Sierra Leone in the 1780s, people there wore several charms at once, each targeted towards protecting against a specific misfortune: “one is to preserve him from shot, one from poison, another from fire, others

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Ideas about what kinds of objects conferred power differed between regions. In Senegambia, Muslims and non-Muslims alike sought out specialists called *marabouts* (itinerant scholars)\textsuperscript{125} for pieces of Arabic writing—especially Koran verses—as powerful elements of protective amulets that the Portuguese began to call *bolsas de mandinga* (Mandinga bags/pouches).\textsuperscript{126} Words in modern Wolof derived from Arabic for “feiticheur” and “fetichisme” (*jibar b*), as well as a specific term for “talisman made with Koranic writings” (*téere*) point towards this history.\textsuperscript{127} In the 1780s, Matthews noted similar “griggories” containing powders and pieces of paper with Arabic words from the Koran in use further south in Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{128} At the time of Mungo Park’s 1793-94 expedition along the Niger River, he reported Mandé-speakers’ use of similar amulets of animal horns filled with *saphoes*—paper with Koran passages.\textsuperscript{129}

While the exact content of these objects of power differed between regions, the act of composition itself is crucial for understanding the ways West Africans thought about health, healing, and misfortune. European accounts frequently commented on these compositions in pouches, horns, tubes, and mixed media statues and on how specialists consecrated these powerful objects through their assemblage. While often disparaging in tone—from “nasty and


\textsuperscript{125} Hawthorne, *From Africa to Brazil*, 209.

\textsuperscript{126} David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45; Sylviane Anna Diof, “Devils or Sorcerers, Muslims or Studs: Manding in the Americas,” in Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, eds., *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 147; Hawthorne, *From Africa to Brazil*, 222. Diof’s chapter also traces out the history of associations with *mandinga* ethnicity and identity in the Americas. For more on the adoption and circulation of *bolsas* into the Portuguese Atlantic, see Santos, *As bolsas de mandinga no espaço Atlântico*.


\textsuperscript{128} Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone*, 132.

dirty little trifles”¹³⁰ to “trash”¹³¹—these observations are important for their emphasis on composition. In her work on objects of power (bo) among speakers of Gbe languages, particularly human shaped statues or bɔciɔ (lit. “empowered cadaver”) art historian Suzanne Blier explains the reasoning and significance behind the main elements in creating these statues that caused such revulsion for early modern Europeans. Saliva ‘glued’ ritual speech to an object; fire, metaphorically represented through the heat of powdered peppers, red palm oil, or alcohol, brought the power to heal and to harm; knots and twisted cords of raffia with hair, feathers, or fur bound or “fixed” the power of the composition together; and finally a patina of blood smeared over the surface acted as both a sacrificial transference of life-force to the object and an offering to higher powers, whether specific vodun or ancestors.¹³²

The act of binding or tying up requires further analysis, as both the action of empowering these compositions and a key metaphor for understanding power and affliction. Speakers of Gbe languages interviewed by Blier in the 1980s associated cords and binding with the dead, describing illnesses caused by angered ancestors as the dead binding the living. At the same time, cords could signify life, with life understood as a cord (kan) and descendants attached through such cords to the lives of their ancestors. Furthermore, bound empowerment objects could be used to cause suffering—the fundamental act of witches conceived of as an act of tying up—at the same time that ritual bondage of the sick was part of healing.¹³³ Early modern West Africans likely understood similar ritual binding as powerful actions of affliction or healing. For example, Bosman described an act of binding with powerful objects through a ritual conducted by a specialist following a birth on the Gold Coast: “the Child is no sooner born than the Priest

¹³⁰ Barbot, Barbot on Guinea, 221.
¹³¹ Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, 123.
¹³² Blier, African Vodun, 74, 78, 80, 92; see entirety of “Chapter 2 Audiences, Artists, and Sculptural Activators.”
¹³³ Blier, African Vodun, 244-246, 293-296.
(here called Feticheer or Confoe) is sent for, who binds a parcel of Ropes and Coral, and other Trash about the Head, Body, Arms and Legs of the Infant: After which he Exorcises, according to their accustomed manner; by which they believe it is armed against all Sickness and ill Accidents.”

Twentieth-century Ewe speakers referred to ritual practitioners as dzosalá (one who ties or wears charms) and their action of dzosasa (tying charms) using the same root dzo (fire, heat, light) they used to describe good fortune, misfortune, and empowerment objects. Likewise, the Fon-speakers Blier interviewed described a sick person as bla u (lit. bound body) and developed a word kannumon (lit. “thing belonging in cords”) for “enslaved person.”

Further west, nineteenth-century Akan speakers described the action of a tightly bound charm driven into the ground of a house or town as “catching” or “binding” a sorcerer, while they used their verb tō for a range of meanings including “to twist, to entangle, to poison.” As I will discuss in later chapters, Africans and their descendants in the Americas believing themselves to be afflicted by sorcery sometimes described themselves as being ‘tied up.’

Speakers of Fon, Ewe, and Akan—languages sharing descent from Proto-Kwa—used the root -bo- not only to discuss empowerment objects, but a whole suite of power and spirit words evident in dictionaries from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, in addition to bo (charm, empowerment object) and bociɔ (human shaped statuette), both Ewe and Fon speakers used -bo- words to discuss healer-diviners (respectively bokó and bokómọ). Akan speakers used this root to form the words o-bonsám (sorcerer, witch; evil spirit), abonsám-kürów (spirit world), and bow (charm/fetish hidden in the ground). I can connect some of these ideas

134 Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, 123.
135 Westermann, Evefiala, vol. 1, 26, 28; Blier, African Vodun, 78.
136 Blier, African Vodun, 26; see suite of slavery words in Segurola, Dictionnaire fon-français, 286.
137 Christaller, Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages, 214, 498.
138 Westerman, Evefiala, vol. 1, 6; Segurola, Dictionnaire fon-français, 94-95; Blier, African Vodun, 2, 4.
139 Christaller, Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages, 37, 41, 44.
to the late seventeenth-century, as Akan speakers in that period used *bosom* both to describe spirits generally and for what Bosman described as a “fetiche” used to injure others.\(^{140}\) Having obtained the *bosom* from a specialist, a person could place it “in some place which their Enemy is accustomed to pass” to cause their death.\(^{141}\) With his own ideas of poison centered on an ingested or otherwise internally applied substance, Bosman ridiculed the idea of a “poison” being efficacious by stepping over it.\(^{142}\) The fact that Akan speakers innovated a specific word to describe a hidden charm that could cause an affliction when stepped over—and that they connected this word to spirits and practitioners—suggests considerable concern with this very particular kind of poisoning.

West African specialists with the knowledge of sorcery and ability to create empowerment objects were generally respected, feared, and morally ambivalent figures, as they could use their expertise to help or harm people.\(^{143}\) Among Fon speakers interviewed by Blier, sorcerers were powerful people and concerns about the use of sorcery—often within a community or family—were fundamentally concerns about the abuse of power.\(^{144}\) People sought out these powerful specialists to make and activate *bo* empowerment objects for a wide range of

\(^{140}\) Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 147, 153-154.

\(^{141}\) Intriguingly, while Bosman in the original Dutch described the object as a “beswoorne” (conjured thing) and the practice as “fetiche,” in the 1705 English translation changed these terms to “poison” and the “Art of poisoning” (in the original Dutch, Bosman only used “vergift” to refer to poisoned arrows and venomous animals). Still, in comparing the practices on the Gold Coast to the “Italian Fetiche”—Italians being strongly connected to poison in the early modern period—Bosman made a connection to poison. Bosman, *Nauwkeurige Beschryving van de Guinees Goud-Tand-en Slavekust*, 137-138; Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 148.

\(^{142}\) Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Gold Coast of Guinea*, 148. Intriguingly, late nineteenth-century Akan speakers also used a *bo* word *abɔrɔtɔtɔ* for the shrub *Strychnos nux-vomica* and its extremely poisonous seed—a plant that is indigenous to India, not West Africa. At some point before this dictionary was first compiled in the 1880s, Akan speakers not only adopted this plant, but also named it with a richly evocative root connecting poison, sorcery, and the spirit world. [Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages*, 41.


purposes. Blier describes her lists of purposes for commissioning *bo* empowerment objects as a catalog of “individual longings, fears, hopes, and concerns,” including desires to attract others, to cure illnesses, to cause an illness, to protect against the malevolence of another, and to poison someone at a distance.\textsuperscript{145} However, it is just as important to see the ways in which benevolent sorcery commissioned by one person could be understood as harmful to another. A defensive *bo* worked aggressively; to protect one from malevolent sorcery or bring about one’s desires, the *bo* would harm the sorcerer with malevolent intent or negate the desires of someone else. Likewise, a malevolent or aggressive *bo* brought positive benefit to the interests of the person who used it.\textsuperscript{146} If fortune was seen as a zero sum game, then efforts to improve one’s life and fortune could be harmful others.

Spirit power also had an important judicial role in West Africa. In one of the early Portuguese accounts of their interactions with Mande speakers, Valentim Fernandes observed in 1500 the use of “some *maleficio*” to identify thieves.\textsuperscript{147} More commonly, European accounts discussed corpse interrogation to identify causes of death and poison ordeals whereby those accused of crimes, such as sorcery, adultery, and murder, could attempt to clear their name. Forms of corpse interrogation were common from the Gold Coast to the Bight of Biafra.\textsuperscript{148} According to Bosman, following a death on the Gold Coast the relatives of the deceased launched an inquiry into the causes: had the deceased perjured or broken an oath? Did they have any “powerful Enemies, who may have laid *Fetiche’s* [sic] in his way”? During this interrogation, the body would move to indicate affirmative answers to questions. “If there be no

\textsuperscript{146} Blier, *African Vodun*, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{147} Brasio, *Monumenta missionaria africana*, 1:703.
suspicion of Poyson,” the next investigation would be into whether the household was deficient in any way in the performance of offerings and rites, until people were satisfied that the cause of death had been properly identified.\footnote{Bosman, \textit{A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea}, 226-227-228.}

Those accused by such rituals or other forms of divination as the cause of death or the perpetrator of another crime generally had recourse to prove their innocence through a poison ordeal: the consumption of a substance believed to cause death if the oath taker lied.\footnote{Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 933.} This conception of “poison” as conditionally efficacious depending on the morality of the consumer was very different from the way late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans discussed and thought about poison. According to Bosman’s informants on the Gold Coast, “they believe the perjured Person shall be swelled by that Liquor till he bursts; or if that doth not happen, that he shall shortly dye [sic] of a Languishing Sickness.”\footnote{Bosman, \textit{A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea}, 149-150. Barbot and Atkins also reported belief in terrible agony resulting from perjury, see Barbot, \textit{Barbot on Guinea}, 2:572; Atkins, \textit{A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies}, 103-104.} The words Ewe and Akan speakers used for these ordeals made a semantic connection between empowerment objects and the agency of spirits; these poison ordeals and oaths were understood to have the power to strike down liars because they were connected to the spirit world, not because of the physical properties of the substance consumed.\footnote{A word used in late nineteenth-century Akan, \textit{aká-bó} (to undergo the ordeal by water) made a connection between \textit{bo} empowerment objects with this ordeal, specifically the “bitter water.” Christaller, \textit{Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages}, 214. On the root \textit{bo} among Gbe-speakers, see Blier, \textit{African Vodun}, 4. In the vocabulary Barbot compiled, he noted among Ewe speakers the word \textit{bodou-houy} [vodunnunu] (to drink fetish, possibly to seal a pact). CITE Jean Barbot, \textit{Barbot’s West African vocabularies of c. 1680}, P. E. H. Hair, ed. (Liverpool: Centre of African Studies, University of Liverpool, 1992), 22.}

Described by Europeans as “red Water,” “bitter water,” “Oath-Draught,” and “edible Fetish,” I suspect that the substance West Africans used to conduct these ordeals was bark from \textit{Erythophleum suaveolens}—the same tree whose vomit-inducing properties attracted Buytrago’s
attention in Angola. Called the “red water tree,” “bois rouge,” and “ordeal tree” in West Africa today, *E. suaveolens* has a natural distribution from coastal Senegambia through the tropical forests and wooded savannahs of West, West Central, and Central Africa. Its bark has been used for many purposes, including as an emetic, a fishing poison, and an antidote. Vomiting was central to these oaths and ordeals as a way of proving one’s innocence. Blier’s work among Fon and Ewe speakers suggests that the consumption of a substance that made one vomit was key because it could clarify that the oath taker had nothing emotionally hidden in their stomach.

A common idiom connected the stomach, vomiting, and illnesses of the stomach to emotions and malevolent afflictions. Fon speakers interviewed by Blier discussed the stomach as the “seat of human emotions” and used it metaphorically to express ideas like “peaceful” (*fa xome*, lit. “cool stomach”), “innocence” (*xome vo*, lit. “the stomach is empty”), “evil” (*e gmlan xome*, lit. he has a bad stomach”) and “to be in a bad way” (*e gble xome*, lit. “the stomach is spoiled”). Similarly, nineteenth-century Akan speakers used the same root for *aya-ase* (lower part of the belly), *ayare-sá* (the act of power of healing), *o-yaresáfo* (one that heals or cures a disease), and *o-yàré* (wickedness, illness, disease). The stomach was also the “seat of the affectations” for Igbo speakers, who used this noun to identify particular stomach-based afflictions. Ideas about the stomach and the power of binding came together in *bociọ* statues in the Bight of Benin, as people often tied cords around the bellies of these statues particularly

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157 Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages*, 556.

associated with causing or preventing acts of sorcery.\textsuperscript{159} The act of binding was also one of “taming”—to bind the belly was to tame or harness an emotion.\textsuperscript{160} Blier made the insight that the physical symptoms Fon speakers cited when discussing afflictions caused by malevolent sorcery were very similar to those caused by stress and anxiety and were primarily centered on the belly. These symptoms included “stomach cramps, vomiting, diarrhea (or constipation), weight loss, sleeplessness, and nighttime pain,” as well as menstruation difficulties.\textsuperscript{161} The fact that early modern Europeans associated some similar symptoms—particularly stomach pains and vomiting—with acts of poisoning opened doors to situations where two people could have interpreted the same affliction as the result of “poisoning” for very different reasons.\textsuperscript{162}

The era of the slave trade was one of increased anxiety for many people in West Africa; historians of the region have suggested that during this period people became increasingly concerned about witchcraft, malevolent afflictions, and the practitioners capable of both healing and harming. People in the Bight of Benin had used bo empowerment objects to manage anxiety before the slave trade, but these objects became particularly important during this period as a means and strategy of response to perceived increasing misfortune.\textsuperscript{163} Further east, the role of diaba specialists in villages of Igbo speakers also changed and intensified over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as people increasingly sought the consultation of oracles, made more petitions and sacrifices, and commissioned more charms for their protection.\textsuperscript{164} A combination of increased anxiety and the skyrocketing prices Europeans offered for slaves on the coast led many

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{159} Blier, \textit{African Vodun}, 145, 295, 309.
\textsuperscript{160} Blier, \textit{African Vodun}, 310.
\textsuperscript{161} Blier, \textit{African Vodun}, 32-33.
\textsuperscript{163} Blier, \textit{African Vodun}, 24, 27.
\textsuperscript{164} Chambers, \textit{Murder at Montepelier}, 64.
\end{footnotes}
West African societies to alter their judicial systems, selling many into slavery at tribunals for crimes—like sorcery—that would have previously been punished with fines or possibly death. European accounts of Sierra Leone over the course of the early modern period reveal changes in an emphasis on divination and witchcraft over time and their relationship to systems of justice. In other parts of West Africa, rulers sometimes arrested and sold individuals identified as possessing powers into the transatlantic slave trade as a way of neutralizing a political threat. Such was the case of priests of the *vodun* Sakpata in the vicinity of the Kingdom of Dahomey, as they became rival sources of political power for the many refugees of the Dahomey expansion. West Africans carried their anxieties and means of dealing with them to the Americas; they adapted their practices in the new realm of violence that was plantation slavery as they struggled to survive.

*West Central Africa*

The history of ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery in West Central Africa is at heart a history of healing as both an institution for critiquing power and, crucially, as an institution of power that was critiqued. I can explore this *longue durée* history of ideas through the archive of words, reconstructing past meanings and forms with historical linguistics. While many ideas were durable, they were not unchanging. Speakers of languages in the Njila family—covering the savannas of most of modern Angola and parts of Namibia, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—and the Kikongo Language Cluster (KLC)—inhabiting the lower reaches of the Congo River—continuously innovated, elaborated, and changed the ways they discussed poison, medicine, and sorcery. The Atlantic period was important for the

165 Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 935-936.
166 Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 211-216.
167 Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 320; Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 22, for more context see entirety of “Chapter 1 Dahomey.”
frequency and kinds of changes people made, but it was not a breach from some preceding stasis.

The degree of certainty on absolute chronology available through historical linguistics is different than that of datable documents analyzed with philology. The time scales I use in this section, especially for the deeper past, are much looser than historians working primarily with datable documents may be comfortable with; they are more solid in the sense of relative chronology than absolute chronology. I have taken the dates that I do use for major language splits from previous scholarship working with both linguistic and archaeological evidence. (See Appendix A for more detail on the mechanics of historical linguistics and dating methods).

Proto-Njila speakers and Proto-KLC speakers had a shared inheritance, both of ancient roots innovated by Proto-Bantu speakers and more recent innovations made by their shared ancestor(s). (See Appendix A for the KLC and Njila classification trees). In my study of these language families of West Central Africa, I examined roots that the descendants of Proto-Njila and KLC speakers used to discuss a wide semantic web of health, healing, misfortune, spirits, and sorcery. The following roots, listed with their oldest reconstructed meanings, likely protolanguage of innovation, and the numbered noun classes when relevant, are the most relevant for this discussion:

- Homophonic cluster: 1. *-bând- (v.t. to split); 2. *-bând- (v.t. to begin); 3. *-bând- (v.i. to flatten, lie flat). Protolanguage: Proto-Bantu.
- *-dēmb- (v.i. to be tired, be weakened). Protolanguage: Proto-Bantu.
- *-dōg- (v.t. to bewitch, to curse). Protolanguage: Proto-Bantu. Major inherited derivative(s): *-dōgi (14) (n. witchcraft, spell, poison), *-dōgi (1/2) (n. witch).
- *-gāng- (v.t. to tie up). Protolanguage: Proto-Bantu. Variant: *-kāng-. Major inherited derivative(s): *-gāngā (14) (n. medicine), *-gāngā (1/2) (n. expert, healer-diviner).

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168 Following convention with other historians who use historical linguistics, for reconstructed roots I will list the languages that root/meaning is attested in (there is a list of dictionaries and their respective languages in the bibliography); for specific words from specific dictionaries I will cite the dictionary.
170 BLR-3, no. 919, C.S. 555.
As my source base for this project was dictionaries—many of which did not use diacritic marks to indicate tone—rather than attestations collected in fieldwork, I was not able to reconstruct tone. I will therefore use the above early forms and tone symbols of each root when referring to the root in its descendant iterations, even though changes in tones may have occurred. A shared ancestor of Proto-Njila and Proto-KLC speakers—dating to the Bantu family’s fifth or sixth major divergence, before the KLC branch split from the main tree—made several key innovations to this inheritance on health and healing. From the homophonic cluster of *-bánd-roots, they innovated a new verb “to heal, to cure” and noun “healing, curing.” They further made a new semantic connection by layering “to be in good health” onto the verb *-kód- (to be

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174 BLR-3, no. 1819, C.S. 1072-1073. On the connection between *-kitî nature spirits specifically, see Vansina, Paths in the Rainforests, 297; Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 51; Schoenbrun, The Historical Reconstruction of Great Lakes Bantu Cultural Vocabulary, 187-188.
175 BLR-3, no. 1874, 6999. C.S. 1104, 1107, 1110.
176 For more on tones, and particularly tone shifts and tone spreading phenomenon in Bantu languages, see Charles Kisseberth and David Odden, “Tone,” in Derek Nurse and Gérard Philippson, eds., The Bantu Languages (London and New York: Routledge, 2003). As for the consonants, I used the dictionaries to create spirantization and diachronic phonology charts to track regular sound changes. Many of the consonants in the roots I chose to investigate were quite stable, especially *k (with k > k across all the Njila languages I investigated). *b is also a fairly stable consonant in the Njila family, though b > Ø occurs in several of the Kwanza languages. d > l was a common phonological change across the Njila languages, with d > r as an exception in the Okavango branch. g > Ø was common; however addition of the nasal (e.g. nganga) before the g appears to have stabilized it.
177 For more on the major Bantu divergences, see Rebecca Grollemund et. al., “Bantu expansion shows that habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersals,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 112, no. 43 (2015): 13296-13301.
They also made a significant innovation to the verb *-dèmb-, layering on a new dominant meaning “to calm, sooth, pacify, tame.” They also made several innovations with *-kác- in the semantic domain of tying/untying and tightening, building on a similar metaphor connecting this idea to affliction and healing made in the ancient root *-gàng-. The histories of words can paint a picture of the lives and cares of the people who used them. Proto-Njila speakers living at the border between the savanna and equatorial rainforests of the Middle Kwilu region worried about witches and their actions, layering a new meaning “to poison by means of nkisi spirits” to their inherited verb *-dóg-. They spoke of *-gàngà expert healer-diviners as people who could tie or untie others, and medicine at a most basic level as the act of tying or untying. Being metaphorically caught, tied up, and perhaps captive, those who suffered from malevolent afflictions were bound—endangering their strength and good health. Crucial as well to the maintenance of good health was the ability to *-dèmb- (to calm, tame, or, in a new meaning innovated by Proto-Njila speakers, “to beseech”) angered ancestors. As Proto-Njila speakers began moving south and west into the savanna, they also innovated a word for a new kind of specialist practitioner in healing craft. While continuing to discuss *-gàngà experts, they used a new noun *-bàndà (healer, diviner) using the new meanings their linguistic ancestors had forged from the homophonic cluster of *-bánd- verbs listed above. As

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179 *-kod- (to be in good health) attested in Kikongo, Pende, Southern Moxico, Umbundu, Nyaneka-Nkhumbi, Kwantuma.
180 Relict distributions of this meaning are so widespread that I think it is less likely to have been a recent and rapidly expanded innovation than for it to have been very old.
181 Attested in Kikongo, Civili, Kimbundu, Rund, Lwena, Cokwe.
182 Attested in Pende, Kimbundu, and Cokwe.
183 Attested in Pende, Rund, Lwena, Cokwe.
184 Attested in Holo, Kimbundu, Libolo, Songo, Mbui, Lwena, Cokwe, Southern Moxico, Umbundu, Nyaneka-Nkhumbi. Vansina argues that *-bàndà (healer, diviner) instead came from a root meaning “concubine,” noting that –mbanda practitioners in the central Angolan river valleys blended genders with their dress and talked about themselves as “wives of the spirit that possessed them.” Words from *-bând- with marriage connotations appeared frequently in my search through KLC languages, but not in terms for healer-diviners. In the Njila family similar connotations only appear in Pende (mbanda, “wife”); however, the 1972 dictionary notes that this term is a neologism in Pende. After consulting with Kathryn de Luna, I think it is therefore more likely that the root meanings
attestations of such a practitioner noun are absent in KLC, but present in other branches of the Bantu family from more recent divergences, this noun was likely innovated after the divergence of the KLC branch.\textsuperscript{185} The fact that Proto-Njila speakers felt the need to use this new specific title suggests that healing and divinatory work was both important and required considerable expertise and likely specialization.

Languages are archives with words as their documents: by examining meanings and forms of words in related languages I can reconstruct a history of the innovations humans have made with these words.\textsuperscript{186} The changes speakers of Njila languages made to their vocabularies of healing and the timing of those changes—identified using sound change patterns and semantic distributions read through a classification tree—reveal a social history of ideas. The construction of this history is intertwined with the history of Njila settlement: the spread of Njila languages across the West Central African savanna from c. 500 BCE to 1000 CE.\textsuperscript{187} Languages have “ancestors” and “descendants” and are connected through genetic relationships that can be described through a classification tree. Jan Vansina assembled the Njila classification I use (see Appendix A) through a combination of historical linguistics—identifying shared innovations—

\textsuperscript{185} Grollemund et. al., “Bantu expansion shows that habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersals.”
\textsuperscript{186} Ehret, History and the Testimony of Language, 3. This section focuses almost exclusively on Njila speakers, as I have not conducted the kind of historical linguistic analysis with KLC speakers to enable me to do the same with them. The dates I use in this section come from Robert Joseph Papstein and a lexicostatistic analysis of cognate percentages of core vocabulary conducted from Papstein and the work of Yvonne Bastin, André Coupez, and Michael Mann. See Papstein, The Upper Zambezi; and Bastin et. al. Continuity and Divergence in the Bantu Languages. More research is needed to express greater confidence and precision with these date ranges. For now, I am layering these date estimates onto the divergences mapped out by Vansina in Vansina, How Societies Are Born.\textsuperscript{187} It is important to emphasize that the spread of these languages was not exclusively the result of massive sweeping migration. Autochthonous communities on the savannas, who interacted and perhaps intermarried with the speakers of Proto-Njila and their descendants, likely adopted these languages themselves. The terms I use—e.g. “Southern Njila speakers” or “Kwilu speakers”—therefore refer to the peoples who spoke these dead languages and not necessarily to people with a shared ancestral origin. See Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 53-55.
and archaeology—connecting these innovations to physical and very roughly datable evidence.\textsuperscript{188}

Figure 1.2: Map of Divergences and Approximate Locations of Njila Family Proto-languages\textsuperscript{189}

Beginning between c. 500 BCE and 100 CE, Proto-Njila speakers the furthest apart from each other to the north and south came into less and less frequent contact, gradually developing

\textsuperscript{188} For Vansina’s classification of the Njila family and his explanation of how he came to it, see the Appendix in Vansina, \textit{How Societies Are Born}, 273-284.

\textsuperscript{189} Based on Map 9 in Vansina, \textit{How Societies Are Born}, 57.
their own idioms, innovations, and eventually their own languages. This process of divergence and the subsequent divergences between the descendants of Proto-Njila speakers were similar to the division of proto-languages from Latin; as with Romance languages, some modern Njila languages have a closer “genetic” relationship than others. Over roughly eight hundred years, speakers of Njila languages made a series of divergences as their languages spread over the savannah of present-day Angola. The first, between Northern Njila and Southern Njila speakers, began between c. 500 BCE and 100 CE. Northern Njila speakers who diverged between the Kwilu River valley—not far from the homeland of Proto-Njila speakers—and the Kwanza River valley respectively became Kwilu and Kwanza speakers. Speakers of these languages and their descendants stayed roughly in the vicinity of these river valleys up to the present. More than any other Njila speakers, Kwilu and Kwanza speakers were the closest to the KLC speakers who had inhabited the lands around and just south of the Congo River since an earlier phase in the Bantu expansion. Over the centuries these neighbors and distantly related “cousins” had extensive contact and mutual influence with each other, highlighting the importance of geographic relationships as well as “genetic” ones.

The descendants of Southern Njila speakers moved more frequently over a greater spread of land, diverging into more proto-languages than Njila speakers in the north. Soon after the divergence of Northern and Southern Njila, Southern Njila speakers diverged into Proto-Eastern Njila speakers, living near the headwaters and watersheds of the Kwango and Kasai Rivers, and Kunene speakers near the eponymous Kunene River in the more arid southwest. In the middle

190 Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 59.
191 For some of the most recent linguistic work on the Bantu expansion, particularly in West Central Africa, see de Schryver et. al., “Introducing a state-of-the-art phylogenetic classification of the Kikongo Language Cluster”; Grollemund et. al., “Bantu expansion shows that habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersals”; Rebecca Grollemund, “Nouvelles approches en classification: Application aux langues bantu du Nord-Ouest,” (PhD diss., Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2012).
centuries of the first millennium, speakers of these proto-languages diverged further into Lunda Block and Moxico speakers in the east and Umbundo-Okavango and Cimbebasia speakers in the southwest. Finally, around c. 1000 CE Moxico speakers diverged into Northern and Southern Moxico speakers. With a few more recent sub-divergences in between, the speakers of these subgroups—Kwilu, Kwanza, Lunda Block, Moxico, Umbundu-Okavango, and Cimbebasia—were the progenitors of the modern Njila languages spoken in the region today.

Southern Njila speakers and their descendants made several unique changes to some of their loan words from other Bantu speakers. While Proto-Njila speakers likely borrowed *-kíti (fetish, charm, spirit) from KLC speakers or possibly speakers of Bantu languages in the East Central savanna, as Vansina argues based on the well defined geographic divisions in meaning, Southern Njila speakers made a significant innovation of their own by using *-kíti to refer to an ancestor spirit—and not just any ancestor, but that of a “great person.” Surviving attestations in Lwena (*mukixi*, 1. the idea of greatness; 2. spirit of the dead, as a great one, usually as a friendly or helpful spirit); (*kixi*, pl. va-, carved representation of a person, used in divining, ornamentation, and kupanda, not an object of worship) and Umbundu (*ekisi*, spirit of a dead nobleman) each point to the spirits of powerful, “great” individuals. It was powerful individuals in life who continued to hold power as spirits in death.

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192 “Southern Moxico” is actually the proto-language of eight languages spoken today (including Nkangala, Lucazi, and Mbunda). However, the most useful dictionary of these languages, compiled in 1939 and used by Vansina in *How Societies Are Born*, treats them as a single language. Furthermore, preliminary evidence using glottochronology and albeit limited core vocabulary data from Bastin et. al. suggests that Southern Moxico only began to diverge into its daughter languages in the early nineteenth century. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use “Southern Moxico” to refer to these languages together.
194 Attested in Lwena and Umbundu.
195 Due to a phenomenon known as spirantization, the *-ti-* in the early form *-kíti* changed to *-s-* and *-∫-* (a sound represented by the Portuguese “x”). For the specific words, see Albert E. Horton, *A Dictionary of Luvale* (El Monte, CA: Rahn Brothers Printing & Lithographic, Inc., 1953), 111; Rev. W. H. Sanders and Rev. W. E. Fay, *Vocabulary of the Umbundu Language, comprising Umbundu-English and English-Umbundu* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1885), 37. See also Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 51-52.
With the power to maintain public health associated with leadership came the responsibility to identify and punish threats to that health, particularly in the form of witches. Ideas about witchcraft as a crime of greed and envy were both widespread and very old in West Central Africa. In addition to words derived from *-dòg-* (to bewitch), speakers of Njila and KLC languages made connections between judicial activities and other roots relating to healing, harming, and leadership. For example, Kikongo speakers used the following verb and compound from *-gàng-* (to tie up): kànga (to tie up, to harden, to imprison) and kànga nsatu (to have a voracious hunger). The ideas of “voracious hunger” and “tying up” also connected to ideas about witches as the greedy, exploitative, and powerful who ate the souls of the living; the fact that these specific words came from the same root as *-gàngà* (expert, healer-diviner) points to an ambivalence regarding the power possessed by these specialists and they ways they could use or misuse it.

Beginning around c. 1000 CE and continuing up to the arrival of the Europeans in the late fifteenth century, speakers of Njila languages and some of their KLC speaking cousins created and elaborated radical changes in governance. At the same time, they innovated, elaborated, and borrowed new words to discuss healing and affliction with each other. Institutions of healing were political institutions; people developed changes in leadership through the language of

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199 Much of this section draws from and elaborates on Vansina’s work on governance in West Central Africa. See Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, “Chapter 3 Of Water, Cattle, and Kings”; “Chapter 4 Of Courts and Titleholders”; and “Chapter 5 Of Masks and Governance.”
healing. These transformations went hand in hand because for people in the West Central African savannah healing had been and continued to be a collective enterprise. The maintenance and insurance of public health, as well as the punishment of threats to this health, were themselves acts of governance—even as the forms of governance and healing that people created took on dramatically different shapes.

In the densely populated fertile lands of western Angola, Kikongo speakers, Kimbundu speakers, Umbundu speakers and other smaller groups around c. 1000 began innovating new leadership roles that linked new chiefs with responsibilities for ensuring public health and prosperity. These leaders were responsible for maintaining good relationships among the living, by arbitrating conflicts between densely populated villages, as well as between the living world and the spirit world. People in western Angola continued to build on this connection between leadership and spirit powers as they formed powerful new kingdoms. In the late fourteenth century Kikongo speakers in polities on the savannah just south of the Congo River came together to form the federated Kingdom of Kongo, whose king was powerful first and foremost as a spiritual leader. Speakers of Njila and KLC languages in these emergent kingdoms made significant semantic links between leadership and healing through titles. For example, in the Kingdom of Ndembu people innovated a word *ndembu that was both a political title “lord” and a noun for “remedy, medicine.” Both the descendants of Kwanza speakers and their Kikongo speaking neighbors had inherited an ancient innovation made by their common ancestor using


201 Vansina describes the act of leadership as one of arbitration, with the title for these chiefs, *soba*, deriving from a new verb *-sompá “to try, to arbitrate.” Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 163-164, 167.


the same root, *-dèmb-, with a transitive verb “to calm, to pacify, to tame” and words relating to ancestor spirits. With the final suffix –u, indicating a noun of quality derived from an adjective—in turn derived from a verb—ndembu could have been understood as “calmed person/medicine.” With this connotation, Ndembu speakers spoke of their leaders and their medicines as both powerful and potentially dangerous—someone or something that had been “calmed.”

At the same time, layered alongside the powers of chiefs and kings were older networks of extraordinary people who had their own connections to the spirit world: particularly blacksmiths, hunters, and diviners. In some ways, the titles and institutions of chieftancy overlapped with the power of these occupations of authority. The emergence of blacksmiths as culture heroes and the metaphorical connection between blacksmiths and political power is well known to historians and anthropologists of Central Africa. In the objects of power or “charms of office”—often made of iron—that gave rulers legitimacy to perform their duties of maintaining public health and ensuring the fertility of the land, people did make concrete connections between the powerful work of smiths, diviners, and kings. For example, people in

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204 *-dèmb- (to calm, to pacify, to tame) attested in Kikongo, Kikongo-Fiote, Civili, Kimbundu, Rund, Southern Moxico, and Umbundu. Vansina argues that the roots for the verb “to calm” and the nouns relating to ancestors and particular trees associated with them came from different roots, respectively *-dèmb- (BLR3: to be tired, to be weakened), from which I derived the Proto-Njila-KLC verb *-demb- “to calm, pacify, soothe, tame,” and *-dimb- (BLR3: to trap by birdlime), with the lime coming from the ancestor tree. Given the overlap between ideas about hunting, medical practice, and connections to both ancestors and leadership in surviving words from one or both of these roots—and inconsistencies in the recording or use of tones—I think it is plausible that Njila and KLC speakers made use of near homophonic relationships between these roots. See Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 239. For information on verb to noun derivation in Bantu, see Thilo C. Schadeberg, “Derivation,” in Derek Nurse and Gérard Philippon, The Bantu Languages (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 79-82.

205 Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 167. See also de Luna, Collecting Food, Cultivating People, “Chapter 3 Fame in the Kafue” and “Chapter 4 Of Kith and Kin.”

206 See Eugenia W. Herbert, Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993); Colleen E. Kriger, Pride of Men: Ironworking in 19th Century West Central Africa (Porsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999). Kriger had a particularly interesting take that focuses on the actual labor of ironworking. While not directly related to the root *gàngà (expert, medicine man), as had until recently been assumed, a Kikongo royal title ngangula also made a literal semantic link between the state of being a leader and the state of being a blacksmith. See Bostoen et. al., “On the origin of the royal Kongo title ngangula.”
the Kwanza basin innovated and quickly spread a word *ngola* for both iron objects of power and a title for the kings of Ndongo. For some of the descendants of Proto-Njila speakers, the root of this word, identified by Vansina as *-kód-* (to be strong, be hard), also continued to carry the connotations of “to be in good health” and the causative “to make strong.” By discussing the King of Ndongo in this way, people in the Kwanza basin made semantic connections between strong leadership and good health.

West Central Africans had long discussed the prosecution of witches as an essential aspect of leadership, but people in these central river valleys also began to describe these powerful new rulers themselves as a potential and particularly threatening source of witchcraft and misfortune; the powers and special connections to spirits they possessed could be used for selfish ends. As discussed above, the connections between the power to afflict and the power to heal in the root *-dóg-* were ancient; what was new was an intensification of the links between this morally ambiguous power and political leadership. In Kikongo, rulers held this power of *kindoki* (power to curse or protect) that shared the same root as *ndoki* (witch)—both ideas deriving from the likely Proto-Bantu root *-dóg-* (to bewitch, to curse). People made connections between leadership and malevolent harm with other roots as well. For example, Kwanza speakers or their Kimbundu-speaking descendants innovated and used a noun *kilemba*.

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207 Meanings of both “to be in good health” and “to make strong” attested in Pende, Southern Moxico. See also Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 192.

208 Njila and KLC speakers in the kingdoms of middle Angola were not the only ones to make connections between ironworking, healing, and leadership in this period. For example, Southern Moxico speakers on the eastern plains began using the same root, *-band-* for a new noun *muvandye* (bellows) as their inherited words *tyimbanda* (doctor-sorcerer) and *vumbanda* (science of the sorcerer). However, they were different in the extent of their elaboration of the responsibilities of powerful kings to use their spiritual power for public prosperity. See Domingos Viera Baião, Ernesto Lecomte, and José Sutter, *Dicionário Ganguela-Português: Língua falada nas regiões do Cubando, Nhembá e Luchaze, Província de Angola* (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Filológicos, 1940), 26, 177.

209 Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 42-43. For a thorough discussion of ideas about power, leadership, and witchcraft among the BaKongo in modern ethnography, see MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*. Note the g > k sound change.
for “negative or harmful sorcery (maleficio),” using the homophonic cluster that they had used to elaborate the *ndembu* title of leadership.\(^{210}\)

In the east, the descendants of Kwilu and Proto-Eastern speakers innovated completely different ideas about governance—centered on age-sets, initiations, and elaborate rites of passage organized across villages—and likewise elaborated ideas about health and healing in relation to these new forms of governance. In this region, people lived in clusters of small villages along the rivers of the Kwa watershed, as the Kalahari sands—a layer of infertile soil—made agriculture difficult everywhere but the river valleys. From the end of the first millennium to c. 1600, peoples from different branches of Njila living in this region gradually developed and elaborated networks of societies based on age and gender that cut across these clusters of small villages. The sodalities organized initiations as important rites of passage. People in the east further elaborated these sodalities into hierarchical oligarchies of “big men” and elders in the northeast and small chiefdoms led by “big men” in the Kwilu basin to the northwest.\(^{211}\) Some of the words people in the east used to discuss initiation and governance overlapped with *-kíti* and *-gàng*-roots connected to health and healing.\(^{212}\)

Speakers of Njila languages in the east also elaborated their roots on healing to discuss expertise, skill, and the power of persuasive speech. Speakers of Njila languages in the east particularly found the near homophonic roots *-dèmb*-(to calm, pacify, sooth, tame) and *-
**dimb**- (to trap by birdlime) productive for discussing new kinds of medicine and governance.\(^\text{213}\)

The sticky substance used to make birdlime came from a shady species of fig tree connected to ancestors, so widely attested in both Njila and KLC languages that I suspect it was used by a common ancestor of speakers of both language families.\(^\text{214}\) Kwilu speakers developed several new nouns, including \(*-lèmbà\) (from \(*-\text{dimb}\)-) for “ancestor, grandparent, elder” and \(*-lémbà\) for “maternal uncle, chief of a clan, notable, pl. ancestors” and the “condition of the chief of a clan, his power” (coming from the idea of “to appease, to placate by a gift, to pay bridewealth”).\(^\text{215}\) Vansina describes this new \(lèmbà\) “lineage leader” as a powerful “big man,” coming from the ideas of placating, making a gift, and paying bridewealth. A \(lèmbà\) leader—usually a maternal uncle, specifically the oldest brother of the resident mother—had an important economic role as the person who negotiated bridewealth and managed the estate.\(^\text{216}\) For the people who innovated and began using this leadership term in the region between the Kwango and Kwilu rivers between approximately 1200-1500 CE, the importance of amassing wealth to distribute to followers and managing bridewealth was connected to prosperity from the flourishing trade routes with KLC speakers around the Congo River.\(^\text{217}\) When Kwilu speakers used their \(*-\text{dèmb}\)- verb, “to beseech, ask for,” they directed their requests to these powerful people, living or dead. From the same root, Cokwe speakers developed a pair of verbs \(\text{lembwisa}\) (to subject, tr.) and \(\text{lembwa}\) (to be subject), describing these new political relationships.\(^\text{218}\)

Surviving \(*-\text{dèmb}\)- attestations among Lwena speakers—e.g. \(\text{cilembekexi}\) (1. coaxing; persuasive, soft or deceptive speech; 2. cajoler), made by combining \(*-\text{dèmb}\)- and \(*-\text{kìtì}\)—
suggest that people also connected leadership to oratorical skill at palavers to resolve conflicts as well as conflicts with spirits. Furthermore, people in the east connected these new ideas of governance to healing through the maintenance of relationships with spirits. Most directly, Lwena speakers began using a new *-dèmb-* verb –*lembeka* (to consecrate with *lilembu* medicine) and the noun *lilembu* for this medicine itself in connection to *kula* (ancestors of elders), specifically contained in a calabash bowl or worn as leaves on the head. Furthermore, in addition to a sacred *mulemba* tree connected to ancestors, Pende speakers innovated a new compound word from *-dèmb-*, *gilembiangola*, to describe a “sacred enclosure” and a specific aquatic plant, translated literally as “sacred fence of Ngola king of the Pende and Angola.”

Finally, I suspect that around the turn of the first millennium and in the centuries prior to European arrival in West Central Africa, speakers of Njila languages in the east adopted the use of poison ordeals with the tree *E. suaveolens*. I am uncertain because while KLC speakers used very ancient words from the root *-kác-* to describe this ordeal and the poison tree—in the same way that Vansina described Bantu speakers in the equatorial rainforest using similar words—my attestations for Rund and Lwena speakers respectively used *mwâaj* and *muâji* for the same tree and poison ordeal. However, ethnographic work from the late nineteenth century exploring the uses of both *nkasa* and *muaj/mauve* poison ordeals strongly suggests that people used different

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221 Gusimana, *Dictionnaire Pende-Français*, 40, 130.

222 Jay Nash, “Ruund, 1996” Comparative Bantu Online Dictionary, University of California Berkeley (accessed 21 April 2016); Horton, *A Dictionary of Luvale*, 1; Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 300. I know it is the same tree because Diniz made specific note of “Lunda” speakers using a word *muava* for *E. sauvelens* and these poison ordeals. This specific chapter in Diniz’s 1918 ethnography brought together speakers of several languages from several different Njila branches who happened to live in a contiguous area, including Lwena, Songo, Minungu, Rund, and Holo speakers. As they are contiguous, I think it is more likely that speakers of these languages adopted the use of *E. sauvelens* for poison ordeals rather than this being a practice that would have had to be present among Proto-Njila speakers to have been inherited into the Kwilu, Kwanza, Lunda Block, and Northern Moxico branches. See Diniz, *Populações indígenas de Angola*, 161-162.
words for similar practices using the same tree. With the regional elaboration of extensive trade networks in the region from c. 1200 to 1500, and the emergence of the Kingdom of Kongo in the late fourteenth century, people living in the Kwilu basin began adopting Kikongo words and imitating Kongo institutions as indications of prestige. Perhaps speakers of Njila languages in the east also adopted the use of this this specific tree from their KLC speaking neighbors. The presence of a powerful officer in charge of administering poison ordeals and advising the king in sixteenth-century Loango north of the Congo River is suggestive of both the widespread use of such poison ordeals and the connections between them and political power; however, more research here is needed.

The south—present-day southern Angola, northern Namibia, and northwest Botswana—was a different world. As Cimbebasia speakers and their descendants moved further and further south to the arid edges of the Kalahari Desert, they developed forms of governance centered on cattle, a contrast to other Njila agriculturalists. Non-Njila Bantu speakers had introduced cattle to the dry savanna from the Southeast around c. 680 CE, and the Cimbebasia speakers who adopted cattle ranching spread over great distances between seasonal pastures. People in the Kunene valley, where agriculture was possible but precarious due to less frequent rains than the river valleys further north, developed a combined subsistence strategy of farming and pastoralism. Independently from the river valleys to the north, they began to innovate new leadership positions responsible for arbitrating conflicts at tribunals, and performing both annual rites for

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223 Ficalho, *Plantas Uteis da Africa Portugueza*, 168-171. Diniz’s 1918 ethnography describes many other poison ordeals practiced by speakers of Kimbundu, Ndembu, Umbundu, and Ngangela—however, he did not mention the specific use of this tree, and I was unable to find attestations of these ordeals in the twelve roots that I examined.


226 Vansina, *How Societies Are Born*, 69, 81-83. Vansina suggests that cattle ranching in these southern savannas was not possible prior to this period as it was a wetter one; less rain meant fewer tse-tse flies.
rainmaking and rites to handle crises such as drought, epidemics, or war.\textsuperscript{227} In the thirteenth century, as the climate in the region became even drier, Cimbebasia speakers began to diverge as they traveled further and further between pastures. The Nkhumbi group of agropastoralists stayed in the Kunene River valley, while the Kwanyama and Herero groups became “cattle nomads”—to use Vansina’s term—further to the south.\textsuperscript{228} Cattle herders during this period developed new forms of governance centered on nomadic patriarchal management of the herds, and a tight social hierarchy that revolved around the owners and tenants of cattle.\textsuperscript{229} As was the case in the north and east, these new institutions were layered with cross-cutting networks of trade, and professional institutions such as blacksmithing and iron smelting.\textsuperscript{230}

In adapting to new environments and in their encounters with new non-Bantu speaking neighbors to the far south, Cimbebasia speakers and their descendants also abandoned or significantly altered many of the roots relating to health and healing that their ancestors had used. Cimbebasia speakers dropped almost all \*-KITI and \*-DÈMB- words, with only a handful of surviving attestations of each in Kwanyama. With the exception of the leadership term identified by Vansina above, I found no attestations relating to cattle across the twelve roots I examined. It is the dozens of cattle terms from different roots attested by Herero speakers that reveal the ways cattle herders had reoriented and elaborated their ideas and practices of healing around the central importance of cattle. While the following words may have been developed more recently, as they were attested in an 1883 dictionary, they are evocative of the kinds of ways cattle nomads from c. 1300 began shifting governance and healing to center on cattle: o-huhura “cattle killed to counteract the effects of witchcraft, the patient being rubbed with its dung”; o-mbanga “cattle

\textsuperscript{227} Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 149, 157.
\textsuperscript{228} Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 107–108, 264.
\textsuperscript{229} Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 123, 264.
\textsuperscript{230} Vansina, How Societies Are Born, 153–154.
killed by the *onganga* or witchdoctor on occasions of sickness, its flesh being also eaten by women and children”; and *o-ngunde* “small cattle, killed for feasting in commemoration of the dead.” Even though they used different roots to express their ideas, Herero speakers made similar connections between healing, sorcery, and power as did people in the river valley kingdoms to the north and the savannas to the east.

![Figure 1.3: Map of West Central Africa, c. 1600](image)

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From the arrival of Europeans on the coast in the late fifteenth century to the start of the colonial period in the late nineteenth century, new objects, ideas, and people posed new challenges and invited new ways of discussing health, healing, and misfortune. Trading slaves for luxury goods upended the social relationships embedded in the different forms of governance discussed above. West Central and Central Africans had participated in a robust trading network with each other for over a millennium, and had reasons internal to their societies for wanting to participate in exchanges for trade goods. Leaders faced a political paradox, as their ability to acquire and distribute highly desired textiles and other imported goods to their followers and dependents was made possible by selling some of these dependents to the Europeans on the coast. Waves of civil wars and conflicts between polities, though arising from political struggles and not necessarily with the purpose of generating slaves, nevertheless did so. As recent scholarship in the Angolan archives has explored, in addition to violence and war, people of West Central Africa were also vulnerable to kidnapping, seizure for debt, and tribunals reconfigured by sobas (noblemen) to punish crimes from adultery to theft to witchcraft, with sale to the web of itinerant traders in the hinterlands of Luanda and Benguela. Further to the north, the civil war in the Kingdom of Kongo from the mid seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries opened the floodgates for rival factions to sell prisoners of war and civilians caught in

233 Achim von Oppen, *Terms of Trade and Terms of Trust: The History and Contexts of Pre-Colonial Market Production around the Upper Zambezi and Kasai* (Munster and Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1994), 47, 236-238; de Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People*, “Chapter 5 Life on the Central Frontier.” It is important to emphasize that the transatlantic slave trade was not simply something that happened to the people of West Central Africa—many polities were active participants and in some cases took the initiative in establishing trade connections. For example, in 1790 a Lwena speaking man traveled from the Upper Zambezi valley to Benguela to establish a business relationship with the Portuguese, inviting a trader from Bahia to come and visit his homeland. In exchange for Atlantic goods, particularly textiles and guns, the people of the Upper Zambezi became the suppliers for the last major wave of the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil in the 1820s and 1830s. von Oppen, *Terms of Trade and Terms of Trust*, 46-49, 59-61; Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 146.

234 Miller, *Way of Death*, 105-106.

the middle both to the Portuguese at Luanda and to the Vili merchants working north of the Congo river—business partners from the mid-seventeenth century with the English, French, and Dutch.  In this period of chronic instability and violence from the transatlantic slave trade, people in West Central Africa began discussing health, healing, and misfortune in new ways.

One common trend was the incorporation of goods and ideas from Europe and the Americas into existing practices. Robust research has been done on how Kongolesi Catholics “domesticated” Catholicism by absorbing it into their existing ideas about relationships between the living and the dead. For example, Kikongo speakers used *ukisi* (holy)—the abstract form of *nkisi* (spirit)—along with *nganga* (expert, healer-diviner) to talk about Christian priests as *nganga a ukisi*, which Linda Heywood and John Thornton translate as “religious specialist with the characteristics of idols.” As part of the Columbian Exchange, people in West Central Africa also began incorporating plants and products from the Americas into their existing practices. Tobacco, far more potent in the early modern period than today, took on a particular significance. Portuguese living in Angola described *gangा* medical practitioners domesticating tobacco smoking into existing healing practices where they had previously been using cannabis. Mbui speakers in the upper Kwanza valley even innovated two new nouns for

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238 Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles*, 64.


240 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 143, 162, 171. This is not to say that cannabis smoking had a static meaning. In his work on explorers in the Congo River and its tributaries in the mid to late nineteenth century, Johannes Fabian examines the ways Luba speakers further east elaborated and innovated a new political organization and healing cult centered on ritual cannabis smoking. See Joannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the*
tobacco, *kambandu* and *mbandu*, from the same *-bánd-* root they used for *kimbanda* (doctor, healer), *imbanda* (remedy), and *umbanda* (medical science). The final suffix –*u* suggests that these new words derived from a verb of quality, while their respective noun class prefixes suggest respective indications of “tools” and “modes of action.” In other words, Mbui speakers described tobacco as a tool or action taken by someone—probably a *kimbanda*—for healing. While conducted in the early twentieth century, ethnographic work from José de Oliveira Ferreira Diniz on the Hungu, also inhabitants of the Kwanza watershed, noted that they used Brazilian ipecacuanha, an important emetic in the Atlantic pharmacopeia, in their poison ordeals.

People who were involved most extensively and directly in the slave trade and with Europeans also developed new institutions of healing. These institutions should be understood as political institutions, as West Central Africans innovated these new healing cults to manage the political paradox described above. In the seventeenth century, speakers of Civili and other KLC languages north of the Congo River heavily involved in trading slaves formed a new institution called *Lemba* that was both a form of governance, organizing and controlling the markets and trade routes from Malebo Pool to the coastal ports like Loango and Cabinda, and a form of public healing to manage the negative spiritual effects of accumulating wealth from the slave trade. *Lemba* became a form of arbitration and institutionalized justice through ceremonial exchanges. Members of *Lemba* were predominantly elite healers, merchants, and chiefs.

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244 Diniz, Populações indígenas de Angola, 186.
244 Janzen, Lemba, 1650-1930, 3-6, 51, 326.
connected to the transatlantic slave trade who had suffered an affliction believed to have been caused by angered ancestor spirits. These spirits needed to be pacified for healing to take place. Kikongo and Vili speakers specifically discussed the appeasement of angry nkisi with innovations from the same transitive verb *-dèmb- (to calm, to pacify, to soothe, to tame) that speakers of Njila languages had inherited. From the main verb lèmba (to calm, to speak, to appease; to turn away the anger of a nkisi; to invoke or conjure a nkisi so that it will be obliged to turn away its anger), they elaborated a verb “to neuter, to tame,” words for “appeasement” and “person who appeases,” as well as a noun for a specific nkisi capable of causing pain in the chest. As part of their initiation, future members participated in a public therapeutic purification, and paid the Lemba society in goods such as palm wine and manioc root—an American plant that had become a staple food crop in the region. For lemba devotees, public healing was a way of addressing concerns about the abuse of power.

In some moments and places, mass movements of public healing became explicit institutions of political critique. For example, in its critique of the Kongo civil war, the slave trade, and the actions of the current King of Kongo, the Antonian movement of Kongo Catholics from 1704 to 1706—led by a young woman who claimed to be possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony—attempted to heal the country by redirecting the kindoki (power, from the root

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246 *lèmba* (Kikongo: to calm, to speak to appease; to turn away the anger of a nkisi; to invoke or conjure a nkisi so that it will be obliged to turn away its anger) were *lembika* (Kikongo, Kikongo-Fiote, Civili: to appease); *lèmba* (Kikongo east variant: to neuter, to tame); *Lémbe* (Kikongo: nkisi that one carries in a basket and causes pain in the chest); *malèmba* (Kikongo, Civili: salutation of peace, health, prosperity). Bentley, *Dictionary and grammar of the Kongo Language*, 322; Laman, *Dictionnaire kikongo-français*, 391; Mission de Lalanda, *Dictionnaire français-fiote* (Paris: Maison-Mère, 1890), 6; P. Marichelle, *Dictionnaire vili-français* (Loango: Imprimerie de la Mission, 1902), 93, 105.
247 Janzen, *Lemba, 1650-1930*, 3-4, 29, 35. Attested in nlèmbo (Kikongo: palm oil); and lembé (Kikongo, Civili: cassava or manioc leaf).
*-dòg-*) that they claimed had been misused.\textsuperscript{248} There is also evidence that some speakers of Njila languages elaborated on the connections they had made between leaders and their powerful relationships to spirits in new and more negative ways in this period. Cokwe speakers, who had fled into the wooded highlands to escape slave raiding and became wealthy middlemen in the transatlantic slave trade in the 1750s, innovated a noun \textit{chikola} (brute, bully) and verb \textit{kolema} (to rebel) from the same root, *-kôd- (to become strong, hard) that people throughout the Kwanza basin had previously innovated for iron objects of power and as a title for the king of Ndongo.\textsuperscript{249} In the Kwanza basin itself, Kimbundu speakers began using the same root in the intransitive verb \textit{kukóléla} (to do bad) and an adjective \textit{úkola} (terrible, evil).\textsuperscript{250}

However, public healing and powerful practitioners were not only institutions of political critique; they were also political institutions that could be critiqued. For example, while the Northern Moxico speaking ancestors of Cokwe speakers inherited the ancient noun *-gângâ* (expert, healer-diviner), Cokwe speakers began using \textit{nganga} to refer only to a “witch.”\textsuperscript{251} This significant change suggests that they no longer trusted their old practitioners of communal healing, seeing them through a new shaded lens of malevolence.\textsuperscript{252} A similar pattern occurred in the way agro-pastoralist Nyaneka-Nkhumbi speakers changed the way they talked about *-bând-* people and \textit{onganga}.\textsuperscript{253} While they had inherited a noun *-bândâ* (healer-diviner), and continued to us it in the form \textit{otyimbanda} (person who possesses magical power), they innovated a new


\textsuperscript{250} Matta, \textit{Ensayo de Diccionario Kimbundu-Portugues}, 50, 149.


\textsuperscript{252} As a caveat, it is also possible that this shift (attested in a 1949 dictionary) was the result of later missionary influence.

\textsuperscript{253} For more on Nyaneka and Nkhumbi speakers, see Vansina, \textit{How Societies Are Born}, 132-157; Miller, \textit{Way of Death}, 30.
noun *ekongo-mbanda* (malefactor, brigand). This was very different and new way of discussing a *-bând-* person, as a criminal and a threat. Early twentieth-century ethnography also noted that a *vimbanda* among Nyaneka speakers would only speak to spirits at night when the fires had gone out, possibly in a non-public or clandestine way. While Nyaneka-Nkhumbi speakers still used their inherited word *onganga*, they also used several proverbs that emphasized the moral ambiguousness of the position: most evocatively, *Tukatapela-pí, kuhen’ombingale? Tukatungila-pí, kuhen’ononganga?* (Where will we have to go to water without there being muddied water? Where will we have to build a house without there being sorcerers?). The people who created, shared, and used this troubled proverb expressed anxiety over abuses of power by the powerful, as well as an inability to escape their presence.

West Central Africans discussed the slave trade as an affliction, a form of witchcraft, and an act of violence. They did so primarily through metaphor, using the same roots their ancestors had elaborated on to discuss health and healing. Southern Moxico speakers took their inherited *-*kód-* verb (to be strong, solid, hard) and layered on additional meaning with *nakolo*, the state of being “swollen” and “captured by illness.” This second meaning suggests overlap between the semantic domains of this verb and its homophone *-*kód-* (to take, touch, with derivative *-*kóde* captive, booty), while the former provides insight into the kind of affliction described. The idea of being “captured” by an illness is particularly evocative, linking the state of being ill with the state of captivity, and perhaps enslavement. Umbundu speakers innovated two new nouns, *ochimbandanga* (affliction of the legs, paralysis) and *okambanda* (young slave). As they used

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254 Silva, *Dicionário Português-Nhaneca*, 339.
256 This translation is my own, from the Portuguese in Silva, *Dicionário Português-Nhaneca*, 336: “Aonde havemos de ir à água, sem que haja água turva? Onde havemos de construir casa, sem que aí haja feiticeiros?”
ochimbanda for “diviner, witch, healer,” owanga for “charm,” and a noun class prefix *-ki that included semantic domains of “outstanding people” and “diseases,” this new affliction could be translated as “sorcery affliction.” Likewise, to form the word for a “young slave,” Umbundu speakers added diminutive prefix ka- to the root mbanda—the same root for ochimbanda. As a young slave, perhaps a young adult highly sought on the transatlantic market, an okambanda would have been someone who had been split from their people and almost certainly bound. The 1738 inventory of a march of slaves in this region from Caconda to Benguela used by Miller as an epigraph for Way of Death vividly illustrates the frequency of leg afflictions, with nearly one in ten of the individuals on the march identified as having a leg injury of some kind. However, the term could have also been metaphorically resonant for Umbundu speakers, as slavery could have been seen as a form of social paralysis.

Some attestations among Njila and KLC speakers suggest that they made a metaphorical connection between being tied up, malevolent affliction, and the marching of slave coffles. Dcrirku speakers in the Okavango delta innovated a suite of new words from *-gàng- (to tie up) for the generic term “disease” mukânga, “health” ukângure, “healthy person” mukângure, and “state of health” likânguko. Dcrirku speakers used the *-kàng- variant of *-gàng- for these new words, indicating that they did not derive them from the same path of the ancient word

259 Le Guennec and Valente, Dicionário Português-Umbundu, 17, 87, 145, 276, 403; Sanders and Fay, Vocabulary of the Umbundu Language, 8, 50; Schadeberg, “Derivation,” 78-82.
260 Sanders and Fay, Vocabulary of the Umbundu Language, 54.
261 Miller, Way of Death, xii-xiii.
ngangá that they continued to use for “medicine-man, doctor.” Instead, they derived these roots from a verb that had either been innovated by Southern Njila speakers, or had recently spread between the geographically contiguous Lwena, Southern Moxico, and Dcirruki speakers: an intransitive verb –kànguka “to be healed, become well.” At the same time, Southern Moxico speakers also innovated the term likanga livu (a line of people)—likely people who were ‘tied up.’ A set of *-kàng- words innovated by Kikongo speakers also suggests a connection between tying up, affliction, and a marching line of people. While the primary meanings of their verb kànga (to tie up, to knot, to tighten) were the durable descendants of *-gàng- (to tie up), Kikongo speakers layered on several very specific and unique meanings “to imprison; to march.” They further elaborated a reversive verb kàngula, with a primary meaning “to undo, untie” and further meanings “to liberate; to defend; to acquit or declare not guilty,” a passive kànguka “to be untied; to be undone; to be free, liberated,” and a noun kàngulwa “rope, cord.” In using these words, Kikongo speakers not only linked binding with enslavement, but also with legal conviction or acquittal at tribunals—a mechanism of enslavement that ensnared so many in the era of the transatlantic slave trade.

The peoples from West Central Africa who were violently pulled into the Atlantic world were part of the generations making these changes by elaborating on their continuing conversation and critique on healing, affliction, and power. Those who arrived in the plantations

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264 Attested in Lwena, Southern Moxico, and Dcirruki.
265 Baião, Lecomte, and Sutter, Dicionário Gangueula-Português, 54.
266 Bentley, Dictionary and grammar of the Kongo Language, 289; Laman, Dictionnaire kikongo-français, 213-215.
of the Americas interacted with peoples from West Africa and Europe, and in doing so made new innovations and adaptations.

Francisco Buytrago’s observations of the uses and virtues of the *nkasa* tree in the 1710s and 20s did not end in West Central Africa. Before completing his circuit to Lisbon and sitting down to write his never-to-be-published manuscript, he sailed on the western currents to Bahia in northeast Brazil. While visiting a relative in Salvador, he discovered that there were many people, free and enslaved, who were “sick of feitiços” and seemed “incurable” with drawn-out illnesses lasting for three or four years. An enslaved woman owned by his relative was dying, with a swollen body and sluggish pulse. She was believed by others to be afflicted with “malificios” [sic]. Armed with some *nkasa* bark he had brought with him from Angola, Buytrago performed his first exorcism. He was considered successful enough that others went to him for treatment; Buytrago reported selling some of his bark to eager buyers and performing at least ten more exorcisms with it while in Bahia.268

Buytrago saw his cure as efficacious because the hidden virtues of the bark helped remove *feitiços* that had been diabolically “lodged” in the sufferers’ afflicted bodies, but it is equally important that the slaveholders and slaves in Salvador also thought his treatment worked. In the decade leading up to Buytrago’s first exorcism in 1729, over 82,000 Africans disembarked in Bahia, about 30% of whom came from West Central Africa; ledgers from Bahian plantations a decade later also suggest that Africans made up a proportion of about 75% of the enslaved population at this time.269 There are thus reasonable odds that amongst the African slaves

Buytrago treated and encountered in Bahia some may have recognized the bark and the Kikongo name he used for it, as well as the techniques he explicitly learned from medical practitioners in Angola and the Kingdom of Kongo. Though I imagine it would have been difficult to identify the tree from the well-traveled bark alone, it is significant that slaves from West Africa also had experience with *E. suaveolens* and could have possibly recognized it in Buytrago’s work. What we have in the moment of Buytrago’s healing appears to be a kind of “dialogue of the deaf,” where multiple parties agreed on a solution to an affliction caused by poison/feitiços while maintaining very different ideas as to where the affliction came from and how and why this solution was efficacious. As I turn now to eighteenth-century poison accusations and trials in the western Atlantic, I will explore these often violent moments as sites of contested ideas, productive misunderstandings, and creative formations of new ideas between people of European, West African, and West Central African descent.

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270 MacGaffey, “Dialogues of the deaf.”
Poison cases in the slave societies of the western Atlantic had a shared history and, with variations, followed similar patterns of emergence, growth, and decline from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Reports of poisoning incidents and the earliest surviving trials of people of African descent as poisoners rose in tandem with the acceleration of the transatlantic slave trade and the rapid expansion of plantations with their demand for enslaved labor. These cases both revealed ideas about poison and helped shape their development through a feedback loop of public discourse among the white colonial officials and slaveholders, who created poison legislation and conducted these trials. By looking at the patterns of poison investigations and trials, I track the history of a specific legal relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery created by colonial courts. The main source of information I have on ideas about “poison” comes from the trials conducted under the laws created by these officials to punish people—especially enslaved people. As trials form a major source base for my analysis of ideas about poison, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth examination of the conditions of their creation and the shifts in colonial lawmakers’ perspectives that impacted their development.

Despite their differences, Bahia, the Dutch Guianas, Virginia, and Martinique had similar patterns in their poisoning cases and the laws these cases were tried under. It is not intuitive that these locations would have much in common in the timing and prosecution of poisonings: while all slave societies, they differed widely in the conditions of enslaved labor, legal systems, and histories within the context of their respective empires and the wider Atlantic. However, a broad examination of surviving poison cases from these locations reveals intriguing convergences in the timing of cases and the relative importance of medical practitioners of African descent among the accused.
Table 2.1: Total Poison Cases and Cases with Medical Practitioners, 1680-1849

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NB: For this table, I have included both full trials and investigations. Bahia cases include all feitiçaria cases (under the same criteria used to make the table on Bahia demographics). A dash mark (-) indicates that I have no data for this period and place. "VA2" refers to data I collected from Cumberland and Brunswick counties—data that is included in Philip Schwarz’s accounting of poison cases in Virginia from 1704-1785. I extended my analysis in these two counties up to 1839. For the Total Poison Cases, I do not include VA2 in the “total” tallies (as these numbers are included under VA), but I do include the cases with medical practitioners as Schwarz did not collect this data. For this table, I have included both full trials and investigations. Bahia cases include all feitiçaria cases (under the same criteria used to make the table on Bahia demographics). A dash mark (-) indicates that I have no data for this period and place. "VA2" refers to data I collected from Cumberland and Brunswick counties—data that is included in Philip Schwarz’s accounting of poison cases in Virginia from 1704-1785. I extended my analysis in these two counties up to 1839. For the Total Poison Cases, I do not include VA2 in the “total” tallies (as these numbers are included under VA), but I do include the cases with medical practitioners as Schwarz did not collect this data.
From the data in Table 2.1, the mid-eighteenth century—and the 1740s in particular—emerges as a shared moment in the growth of these cases, while Martinique stands out for its late revival of poison trials in the nineteenth century. A geographically and temporally broad framework highlights both the striking similarities and important variations in experiences of poison trials in the western Atlantic.

Historians examining poison cases have primarily focused on single locales or colonies within a single empire. Works treating poison cases in Virginia and the French Caribbean have contributed important insights into local manifestations of poison trials, but they miss patterns that can only be seen from placing these cases in a wider context.¹ A recent flowering of comparative works on *obeah* (an umbrella term for African ritual practices in the British Caribbean) has begun to bring together scholarship on *obeah* and poison, but mainly for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² Furthermore, these conversations have rarely overlapped, beyond the occasional brief acknowledgement, with scholarship on *feitiçaria* (sorcery) in the

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Portuguese Atlantic, despite similarities in practices. Part of the difficulty of bringing the histories of poison in these regions together is the diverse array of languages in both the primary sources and the literature. In this chapter, I aim to bridge these often separately treated histories over a large time scale to show how poison cases that linked medicine, sorcery, and people of African descent rose and fell in similar patterns—with Martinique’s second peak as an important exception—and were part of the same story.

Studying patterns in poison cases from four very different locations over 170 years reveals the necessity of attention to chronology and challenges arguments on the link between poison and war. For example, ideas common in poison cases in nineteenth century (e.g. a focus on arsenic and enslaved domestics, especially women) were not a consistent presence in the eighteenth century. Poison cases certainly occurred in the context of wars and rebellions; in fact, the two most famous cases of poison and obeah from Saint Domingue and Jamaica, Makandal (1758) and Tacky’s Rebellion (1760), both unfolded in the particular circumstances of the Seven Years War. The later, in particular, was indeed a crucial starting point for obeah legislation in the British Caribbean. However, examining poison cases year-by-year—beyond these sensational events—in colonies that are not commonly paired reveals a different pattern. The largest single poison crisis, in terms of the number of people on trial, occurred in Martinique in

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4 Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*, 139-146. Moitt focuses on enslaved female cooks poisoning their masters’ food as a chief form of gendered resistance when speaking about both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the data from eighteenth-century cases show that men outnumbered women among the accused about three to one and that the plurality of targets were actually fellow slaves.

5 Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, “Chapter 5 Dangerous Internal Enemies.”

the 1820s: a moment of relative peace in the colony. Poison trials and legislation designed to handle perceived crises of poison emerged in each of these locations over the early decades of the eighteenth century—well before the major mid-century wars. The fact that four colonies with very different histories shared broad patterns in content, demographics, and the timeline of poison cases suggests that the development of poison ideas was less connected to particular events and more to the long interaction and transformation of ideas from Europe and West and West Central Africa.

*Emergence of Poison Trials and Laws*

Before the mid-eighteenth century, laws and lawmakers in Bahia, the Dutch Guianas, Virginia, and Martinique did not make specific connections between poison, medicine, sorcery, and people of African descent. However, early poison cases from the 1680s to the 1740s did begin to make these links; poison legislation followed experiences shaped by these early trials. The timing of the emergence of poison cases coincided with the massive growth of each colony’s enslaved African population to feed respective plantation booms. West and West Central Africans brought their ideas about the ambivalent powers of medical practitioners across the Atlantic; along with European anxieties towards growing enslaved populations these ideas helped coalesce a particular concern with poison. With the acceleration of plantation slavery in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, poison became a crime linked to people of African descent, especially slaves, and with the particular importance of medical practitioners.

The emergence of connections between poison, sorcery, and medicine had the earliest history in Bahia. This is unsurprising, given the region’s distinct history with slavery. Unlike Martinique, Virginia, and the Dutch Guianas, large-scale plantation labor existed in Bahia for a long time before the emergence of eighteenth-century poison cases. Sugar production and its
attendant insatiable demand for labor drove a dual boom in plantations and the transatlantic slave trade to Bahia in the late sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{7} From 1600 to 1680, over 13,000 Africans disembarked in Bahia, 69\% of them having sailed from West Central African ports.\textsuperscript{8} (Tables for data on the transatlantic slave trade can be found in Appendix B). The long history of Africans in Bahia shaped the colony’s earliest poisoning incidents.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, healing practices on Bahian plantations began to create links between poison, sorcery, and medical practitioners of African descent. \textit{Calundús} were ceremonial dances conducted to determine the causes of and solutions to illnesses for clients, organized and run by ritual practitioners. While the term \textit{calundú} would gradually refer to a range of practices adapted from West and West Central Africa, in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Brazil the dance usually involved spirit possession with specific links to West Central African practices; the word itself originated from the generic Kimbundu word for a spirit capable of possession.\textsuperscript{9} Slaveowners in Brazil learned about \textit{calundú} from their African slaves, and there is evidence from the early seventeenth century of their hiring of these medical practitioners to treat slaves afflicted with \textit{veneno} (poison) and/or \textit{feitiços} (magical charms or spells, sometimes used interchangeably with “poison”).\textsuperscript{10} Such incidents established the connections and relationships between slaveholders, practitioners, and slaves that would shape later waves of trials and investigations.

The 1707 Constitution of the Archbishopric of Bahia did address the intersection between \textit{feitiçaria} and medical practice that played out in contemporary Inquisition cases; however, these

\textsuperscript{7} Schwartz, \textit{Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society}, 65, 72. Before the substantial importation of African slaves, Bahian plantations built capital with a reliance on indigenous slaves. For more, see “Chapter 3 First Slavery.”
\textsuperscript{8} Voyages Database, (accessed 18 March 2016).
\textsuperscript{10} Sweet, \textit{Recreating Africa}, 145.
laws drew mainly upon European understandings of the relationship between sorcery and
demons, and did not make explicit connections to people of African descent.  
11 The church’s
central concerns regarding feitiçaria were individuals attempting to go beyond the bounds of
nature. In the church’s view, manipulation of the natural world, or an illusion of successful
manipulation, was made possible only through the agency of a demon and an implicit or explicit
pact with the Devil.12 Medical practice, particularly as performed by lay people, was also an
issue as the pursuit of healing through unsanctioned means opened doors to “pernicious
superstitions,” imperiling the souls of the afflicted. The law therefore forbade anyone from
performing cures without a license and approval by the Archbishop, and particularly emphasized
that no layperson could expel demons from the human body.13 Consistent with church thought in
Europe on the dangers of “superstitious” practices, the 1707 constitution drew a clear line
between sanctioned and unsanctioned medical practice.

While the history of slavery was much different in the Dutch Guianas from Bahia, the
emergence and run up to the rapid growth of poison cases followed a similar pattern. Up until
1745, Suriname lacked poison legislation specific to experiences in the colonies.14 Suriname’s
legal system operated until 1869 under the 1532 Constitutio Criminalis Carolina and Philip II’s
1570 Criminal Ordinance, along with Roman law regarding slaves.15 The Carolina, passed by
Holy Roman Emperor Charles I, allowed for the use of torture to extract confessions and

11 There was a jurisdictional divide, where cases of “feitiçarias, spells, and superstitions” were to be reported to the
Inquisition only when they were “manifest heresy or apostasy.” Several inquisitorial trials hint at the existence of
trials for feitiçaria crimes under the secular judicial system; unfortunately their records for the bulk of the eighteenth
century have not survived. D. Sebastião Monteiro Vide, Constituições primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia (1707)
(São Paulo: Tipografia 2 de Dezembro, 1853), 317.
12 Vide, Constituições primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia, 313-315. For more on the relationship between early
modern European demonology and natural laws, see Clark, Thinking With Demons, especially “Chapter 10
Witchcraft and Science” and “Chapter 19 Witchcraft and the Scientific Revolution.”
13 Vide, Constituições primeiras do Arcebispado da Bahia, 316-317.
14 Ordinances pre-1764 for Berbice have not survived, as they were destroyed in the 1763-1764 slave rebellion.
15 These law codes had been replaced in the Netherlands by Napoelon’s penal reforms at the end of the eighteenth
century, but the reforms were not applied to the colonies. Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 960, 976-978;
established the forms for prosecuting witches.\textsuperscript{16} Early ordinances in Suriname made adjustments to these law codes for local contexts, but did not make direct connections between poison, medicine, sorcery, and people of African descent. The Dutch colonies in the Guianas lacked a slave code comparable to the French Code Noir. Instead, laws regarding enslaved Africans in the colonies came in the form of ad hoc ordinances issued by the local governments—in the case of Suriname, by the eponymous Society.\textsuperscript{17} The first major ordinance regarding plantation management, from 1686, was rather limited and included nothing on poison, sorcery, or medical treatment by or of slaves.\textsuperscript{18}

Virginia was a very different colony from either Suriname or Bahia, yet here too the pattern of poison cases and laws was similar. Up until 1748, Virginian slave laws made no connection to poison, medical practice, or sorcery. The colony’s first brief slave law in 1692 established procedures for trying slaves accused of capital crimes in county courts of \textit{oyer and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 941; Beeldsnijder, “\textit{Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben}”, 236-237.
\item \textsuperscript{18} No. 134 Reglement voor plantagebedienden, 9-24 May 1686, in J. A. Schiltkamp and J. Th. De Smidt, \textit{West Indisch Plakaatboek: Plakaten, Ordonnantieën en andere wetten, uitgevaardigd in Suriname} (Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1973), vol. 1, p. 166-169. There were several ordinances regarding poison in the late seventeenth-century, but of a very particular kind: its use as a fishing practice. The existence of four separate bans on the practice, as well John Gabriel Stedman’s description of its widespread use from his time in the colony in the 1770s, indicates a lack of success in enforcement. None of the bans gave any indication of a concern about people intentionally using this technique to poison others. No. 94 Plakaat: Verontreiniging van kreeken, 17 July 1681, in Schiltkamp and Smidt, \textit{West Indisch Plakaatboek}, vol. 1, p. 112-113; No. 131 Plakaat: verontreiniging van kreeken; vrij cisserij in de kreeken; schoonhouden van grensafbakeningen tussen plantages, 22 September 1685, in Schiltkamp and Smidt, \textit{West Indisch Plakaatboek}, vol. 1, p. 162-164; No. 141 Plakaat: verbod om wild te schieten in de Paramaribo-Divisie; verontreiniging van sloten op socitezkiplantages; verbod om hout te kappen op socitezkiplantages, 7 September 1687, in Schiltkamp and Smidt, \textit{West Indisch Plakaatboek}, vol. 1, p. 175-176; No. 296 Bekendmaking: aanvulling van het verbod om krekten te verontreinigen, September 1722, in Schiltkamp and Smidt, \textit{West Indisch Plakaatboek}, vol. 1, p. 347; John Gabriel Stedman, \textit{Narrative of a five years’ expedition, against the revolted negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the wild coast of South America; from the year 1772, to 1777} (London: J. Johnson & J. Edwards, 1796), vol. 1, p. 402.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
terminer, but did not elaborate on any particular kinds of crimes. Likewise, the more comprehensive 1705 code, regulating both servants and slaves, made no mention of poison or the potential threat of medical practitioners. The laws alone suggest that links between poison and people of African descent appears to have arrived very suddenly and belatedly onto Virginia’s legal landscape.

Early poison legislation in Martinique also did not make the full connection between poison, slaves, sorcery, and medicine. The 1685 Code Noir, the main law code regarding slaves for the French colonies that stood in Martinique until 1831, made no reference to poison, sorcery, or medical practice by slaves. Up until 1724, there was no specific legislation on the subject of poison in Martinique at all. In that year, a royal ordinance applied a 1682 Edict on poison to the Isles du Vent (the Lesser Antilles). This edict came out of the “Affair of the Poisons” in the French court, involving noblewomen and love magic. The edict made crimes of “pretended magic” and any “superstitious” practices that employed sacred objects or prayers. It also imposed tighter restrictions on the sale and use of poisonous substances, especially mineral poisons like arsenic and mercury sublimate, as pretended “diviners” allegedly used them to ensure the success of their predictions. The effect in France was a sharp reduction in accusations of sorcery, as

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19 County courts in Virginia as both a colony and a state had jurisdiction over civil cases and only criminal cases with enslaved defendants. Whites accused of crime were instead tried at the General Court in Williamsburg. Isaae, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 92.
22 The “Affair of the Poisons” was a sensational case, involving several noblewomen commissioning love magic from a sorceress with ties to rogue priests in what Lynn Wood Mollenauer calls the “criminal magical underworld of Paris.” Mollenauer, *Strange Revelations*, see all of Ch 3 “The Criminal Magical Underworld of Paris”.
individuals were instead accused of being “false sorcerers” or “poisoners.” The 1724 application of the edict to Martinique and the other Isles du Vent kept most of the language from the original law, with some significant exceptions. The preface of the 1682 law was rooted in the circumstances of the case, emphasizing pretended “Diviners, Magicians & Enchanters,” who added maléfices (evil spells), vénéfice (poison by magical means) and “poison” to their sacrilege, and the dangers of their seduction of the gullible. In the Martinique law, the preface reflected different circumstances and a different perceived threat: the “enormous Crimes” of “malicious” slaves, serving “Venefices and poisons to the detriment of the lives of our subjects.” The law made a new link between poison, vénéfice, and slaves.

Over the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an important shift in the scale and demographics of the transatlantic slave trade across the western Atlantic, driven by demand to feed plantation booms and supply from rising conflicts West and West Central Africa, corresponded with an expansion of concern about Africans and their connections to poison. As the number of enslaved Africans increased, so did the number of poison cases and the connections between them. Despite the relative decline of Bahian sugar profits, with the successes of other European competitors in the late seventeenth century, sugar plantations and their high demand for labor continued to be the driving force of the Bahian economy. For Suriname, this period was a time of intensification and acceleration of sugar plantation production and the demand for African slaves. Large sugar plantations with hundreds of slaves

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24 Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 25.
26 Schwartz, Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Bahian Society, 160, 163-164. For more on rises and falls in Bahian sugar production up to the mid eighteenth century, see the entirety of “Chapter 7 The Bahian Sugar Trade to 1750.”
27 Suriname had been producing sugar with enslaved African labor for decades in the English and early Dutch periods, but the late seventeenth-century boom accelerated production to a new level. For more on the transition
began to push out smaller plantations by the middle of the 1680s, and over the 1690s the enslaved population doubled. 28 Martinique experienced a dramatic expansion of the sugar-based plantation economy as well. 29 Virginia differed dramatically in both in the form of labor—primarily tobacco plantations—and the scale of imported Africans from Bahia, Suriname, and Martinique. However, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries also saw a major expansion of plantations into the Piedmont interior and a large wave of enslaved Africans. 30

Though imperfect, data from each location also points to a large and growing African proportion of each population in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In Martinique, the 8,967 enslaved people identified by the 1683 census made up an already high 66% of the population—many most likely worked on the colony’s 122 sugar plantations. By 1726, the number sugar plantations nearly quadrupled and the enslaved population rose to 40,403 (77%). With an emergent free black population of 1,304, the total population of African descent in this year outnumbered white habitants 4:1. 31 In Suriname, the 4,137 enslaved Africans and creoles of African descent in 1684 made up 81% of the population—a significant compositional shift from the proportion of 55% at the peak of the English colony in 1663. 32 By the 1701 census, the population of African descent—including 8,500 slaves and approximately 1,000 maroons—dwarfed the 700 Europeans in the colony. 33 That proportion would only increase with the boom

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28 Price, Alabi’s World, 4-5, 11. New coffee plantations in the 1720s also contributed to the demand. Van Stipriaan, Surinaams Contrast, 429.
29 For more on sugar production in Martinique, and the economic history of the colony in general, see Oudin-Bastide, Travail, capitalism et société esclavagiste.
30 This wave has sometimes been referred to as the “re-Africanization” of Virginia. Thornton, Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 318-319; Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 56, 58-67; Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 76.
31 Recensement des îles Amérique, 12 April 1683, ANOM Série C8b, box 17, f. 9; Recensement general de l’île Martinique fait à la fin de l’année mil sept cent vingt six, 16 February 1727, ANOM Série C8a, box 37, f. 14.
32 Games, “Cohabitation, Suriname-Style,” 217, 233. The total population from the 1684 census also included 144 enslaved Indians.
of the enslaved population over the first half of the eighteenth century; by 1752 the 37,835 slaves made up a staggering 95% of the population.\textsuperscript{34} Virginia never came close to such radically skewed proportions between enslaved and free populations; however, over the first half of the eighteenth century the proportion of enslaved people did increase significantly. The enslaved population grew from 3,000 people (7\% of the total population) in 1680 to 16,390 (28\%) two decades later in 1700; by 1750 that population and its relative proportion had further increased to 107,100 (46\%)—the highest proportion from 1680 to 1840.\textsuperscript{35} Unfortunately, general census figures for seventeenth-century Bahia—though ordered by the crown—either were not conducted or have not survived. The first solid data I have is from a 1724 ecclesiastical census. According to it, by 1724 the 45,482 slaves made up 57\% of Bahia’s population. This census did not distinguish between the free white and free African population; anecdotal evidence from early eighteenth-century travelers suggests that the latter were a large portion of the Salvador population.\textsuperscript{36}

The number of African slaves brought to these four locations rose dramatically in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, overlapping with the emergence of poison cases. In Bahia from 1660 to 1730 and Martinique from 1680 to 1730, the number of Africans disembarking in each colony rose exponentially.\textsuperscript{37} The rises for Suriname and Virginia were less dramatic, but still significant. The number of Africans disembarking in Suriname more than

\begin{footnotes}
\item[34] van Stipriaan, Surinaams Contrast, 311, 314.
\item[35] Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 272.
\item[36] Schwartz, Slave Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society, 86-88.
\item[37] The number of disembarking slaves in Bahia rose from 1,193 in the 1660s to 5,121 the following decade, then 11,540 in the 1680s and 42,562 in the 1690s. The number of disembarking Africans in Martinique also rose dramatically: 1,750 in the 1680s; 2,084 in the 1690s; 5,556 in the 1700s; 12,350 in the 1710s; and 20,393—the second highest decade total for the colony’s entire history—in the 1720s. Voyages Database (accessed 18 March 2016).
\end{footnotes}
doubled 1670 to 1690, while the 754 Africans brought to Virginia in the 1690s increased more than ten fold in the following decade.\textsuperscript{38}

With some variation in relative proportions, these four locations shared several common regions of embarkation, particularly the Bight of Benin and West Central Africa. Part of this overlap can be attributed to major political events in Africa that generated numerous civilian and military captives, such as the decades-long Kongoolese civil wars at the turn of the century and the Dahomey expansion in the late 1720s.\textsuperscript{39} The Bight of Benin was the main source of Bahia’s surge, with a secondary and slightly later leap in Africans embarking from West Central African ports from 1690 to 1750.\textsuperscript{40} The Bight of Benin was the embarkation point for 60\% of Africans landing in Martinique from 1680 to 1730, followed by 20\% from West Central Africa.\textsuperscript{41} The early eighteenth century was also a significant turning point for a shift in trade from gold to slaves on the Gold Coast.\textsuperscript{42} While the Bight of Benin contributed 45\% of disembarking slaves to Suriname from 1680 to 1740, there were also major spikes in the relative proportions from West Central Africa (49\% from 1680 to 1700) and the Gold Coast (55\% from 1720 to 1740).\textsuperscript{43} While people embarking from the Bight of Biafra, particularly Igbo-speakers, dominated Virginia’s wave — making up 39\% of disembarking Africans from 1681 to 1750 and peaking at 69\% in the

\textsuperscript{38} Numbers of disembarking slaves in Suriname show an increase from 5,294 in the 1670s to 10,703 in the 1680s. Voyages Database (accessed 18 March 2016).
\textsuperscript{40} Voyages Database, (accessed 18 March 2016).
\textsuperscript{41} Voyages Database (accessed 18 March 2016).
\textsuperscript{42} Stephanie E. Smallwood, \textit{Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora} (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 28-29. For more on the Gold Coast transition to a slaving center, see the entirety of “Chapter 1 The Gold Coast and the Atlantic Market in People.”
\textsuperscript{43} Voyages Database (accessed 18 March 2016).
1740s—they were not alone. There were also two significant and simultaneous spikes from West Central Africa and Senegambia in the 1730s, each amounting to about a quarter of the disembarking Africans for the decade. It was no coincidence that the decades of respective surges in the transatlantic slave trade from common broad regions overlapped with the emergence of new connections to people of African descent in emergent poison cases.

In Bahia, increasing concern about poison and feitiçaria came in the form of denunciations and full trials by the Lisbon Inquisition. Unlike the Inquisition in the Spanish empire, with independent regional offices in American cities like Lima and Cartagena, the Lisbon Inquisition handled all cases in the Portuguese overseas empire from the metropole. Individuals wishing to make a confession or denunciation went to the inquisitorial commissioners—for Bahia, based in Salvador—who conducted an initial investigation and sent their findings to Lisbon. If the Inquisitors chose to pursue the case, the commissioner would arrest the accused, gather additional testimony, and send both across the Atlantic to be tried in Lisbon. If not, the initial report and testimony were instead copied into the cadernos do promotor, the prosecutor’s notebooks: a repository of the cases that weren’t. The Inquisition was far more interested in accusations of judaizing or heresy then feitiçaria and related crimes, usually declining to undertake the expense of trying these cases. By examining both the investigations in the cadernos do promotor (prosecutor’s notebooks) that did not go to trial and the full trials, I can track changes in the way denouncers began to associate sorcery with African medical practitioners.

44 Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 23-24. See all of “Chapter 2 Out of Calabar: The Igbo Hinterland.”
45 Voyages Database (accessed 18 March 2016).
46 Sweet, Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World, 149, 152-153. Of the approximately 40,000 cases from the Portuguese empire that went to full trial, Sweet counts only 46 involving Africans accused of sorcery. For a history of the Inquisition’s activities in Brazil from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, see the entirety of Mott, Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade.
While trials for feitiçaria did exist in the first century and a half of the Inquisition’s presence in Bahia, a consistent link between sorcery and people of African descent did not emerge until the end of the seventeenth century. The Lisbon Inquisition established the commissioner’s office in Salvador in 1549. However, the earliest feitiçaria trials were from the inquisitorial visit in the 1590s and primarily involved mamelucos—individuals of mixed European and indigenous descent—often in conjunction with accusations of idolatry in new syncretic religious practices. From 1593 to 1687, of the 143 cases originating from Bahia that were brought to full trial by the Lisbon Inquisition, there was not a single case of feitiçaria or a related crime, and only two of the total cases involved people of African descent. This is not to say that there were no denunciations of African medical practitioners for causing or curing malevolent afflictions. However, a repeated and regular connection between people of African descent, poison and/or feitiços, and medical practice in both full trials and investigations of the Lisbon Inquisition only began to climb at the turn of the century.

Both practitioners allegedly causing afflictions and those performing ceremonies to cure them appeared in a rising number of these early cases. In the two full trials and twenty-one investigations in the cadernos do promotor from 1686 to 1707, there were ten cases involving

47 ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa (IL), Series 28 Processos de Fé. This collection is organized by individual case files and is searchable on the ANTT website. For more on Santidade de Jaguaripe as a syncretic religion, the position of mamelucos in the early settlement and development of Bahia, and their power struggles with the Jesuits reflected in these inquisitorial trials, see Metcalf, Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Early Brazil, “Chapter 7 Resistance” and “Chapter 8 Power.”

48 ANTT, IL Series 28. The two cases were of pardas Maria Barbosa for heretical propositions in 1612, and a mulato slave named Jerónimo Soares for sodomy in 1644. Processo de Maria Barbossa, 1612, ANTT, IL Series 28, f. 3382; Processo de Jerónimo Soares, 1644, ANTT, IL Series 28, f. 12257. For ‘related crimes,’ I included cases of calundús, quilbandsos (healing dances, similar to calundús), divination, maleficio (literally “to do bad” at someone, i.e. witchcraft), pacts with the Devil, bolsas de mandinga (making or wearing protective amulets), love magic, and superstition under feitiçaria as an umbrella term.

49 James Sweet describes the use of West Central African practices of divination and spirit possession to identify and cure illnesses “[taking] root” already in the mid-seventeenth century, evident in several denunciations in the cadernos do promotor. Sweet, Recreating Africa, 144. For more on calundús, see the entirety of “Chapter 7 Calundús, Curing, and Medicine in the Colonial World.”

50 ANTT, IL Series 28; ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 55-131; Souza, The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross, 255; Sweet, Recreating Africa, 143. Both Souza and Sweet track this rise across Brazil, and in Minas Gerais in particular.
fifteen medical practitioners, all but one of whom were of African descent. One case from 1686 involved slaveholders specifically purchasing an enslaved couple because of their reputation for curing poison/feitiços with sorcery, hoping to make money off of their practice. Several Africans, also identified as feiticeiros, were accused of causing such afflictions in other cases. Knowledge regarding these afflictions, and sometimes the initial accusation itself, came from the slaves, and slave owners gradually adopted it. Slaves and slaveholders made connections between poison, feitiçaria, and African medical practitioners as both the cause and cure of afflictions well before they appeared as such in law.

Despite the concerns of the Archbishop and the Lisbon Inquisition, unsanctioned medical practitioners of African descent continued to treat malevolent afflictions—caused by “poisons” or feitiços—in the early eighteenth century and both Africans and Europeans continued to use their services. Several cases involved medical practitioners diagnosing and performing cures through divination and spirit possession. African medical practitioners also incorporated particular roots to work as “counter-poisons” in the bolsas de mandinga, created and sold for protection from various misfortunes. These cases with their connections to healing and poison were not the only kinds of feitiçaria crimes reported to the Inquisition in these decades; from

51 ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 59-76.
53 Processo de Simão, 1688, ANTT, IL Series 28, f. 8464; Processo de Gracia, 1699, ANTT, IL Series 28, f. 12658. The case of Manoel was not tried, but came up as a secondary denunciation in the investigation surrounding Gracia: a reputed “Congo” diviner, feiticeira and curandeira, brought to Lisbon for full trial.
54 Some local priests began to engage with and sometimes even incorporate African ideas into their practices, even if the church’s laws did not. Often this syncretism was part of a deliberate and explicit effort to draw patients away from unsanctioned practitioners. Mott, Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade, 34. Luiz Mott discusses 1713 case of Friar Alberto de Santo Tomás in detail in “Chapter 2 Um Dominican Feiticeiro em Salvador Colonial.” See also Sweet, Recreating Africa, 222-223.
56 Processo de António Rodrigues da Silva, 1725, ANTT, IL Series 28, f. 11426.
1707 to 1738 there were also several incidents of European women improperly invoking saints, making love magic, and allegedly copulating with demons. However, a small but steady stream of cases reinforced specific links between sorcery and medicine, and their use by African practitioners to treat poison/feitiços.

In the Dutch Guianas, links between African medical practitioners and poison cases emerged before ordinances made the connection. In Suriname and Berbice, the respective Courts of Policy and Criminal Justice, made up of appointed elites, conducted these trials. They were both the main criminal courts and the respective colonies’ legislative bodies, responsible for issuing ordinances. Starting in the early 1730s, poison trials began to appear in Suriname and grew steadily. The first surviving poison case in the records of the Suriname court was in 1731; from 1735 to 1739 accusations of poison made up 10% of all trials and 20% of trials involving slaves. From the beginning, these early cases established associations between poison and medical practitioners of African descent, and punished the convicted harshly; five of the sixteen poison cases from 1731 to 1739 ended in executions, including half of those involving medical practitioners. The connection between poison and people of African descent existed, but only

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57 Denúncia de Ursula de Abreu e Antonia da Sylva, 15 March 1718, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 87, p. 315 (improperly invoking saints and love magic); Denúncia de Antonia da Costa, 5 August 1721, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 113, p. 254 (improperly invoking saints for cures); Denúncia de D. Francisca de Freitas Xavier e Ursula Correa, 20 December 1708, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 75, p. 532 (love magic); Denúncia de Domingas Pinto Perras, 11 December 1708, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 76, p. 174 (copulating with a demon). The denunciation of Antonia da Costa is particularly interesting, as the Holy Office in Portugal had already convicted her once for divination. Her punishment had been banishment to Brazil, a not uncommon sentence up through the early eighteenth century. Laura de Mello e Souza tallied 31 Portuguese sorcerers banished to Brazil from 1573 to 1721, nearly half from 1660 to 1690. Souza, The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross, 93, 117.

58 The Suriname criminal court was made up of thirteen colonial elites appointed for life by the governor, who presided over the meetings himself. One of the councilors on the court doubled as the Fiscaal, a public prosecutor who conducted initial investigations into complaints and decided whether cases would go to court. Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 941, 959; van Stipriaan, Surinaams Contrast, 38; Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”, 30.

59 NADH, RVP vol. 789-793. The earliest full volume on record for the RVP was from 1722, with spotty surviving documentation for the rest of the decade (volumes covering 1723, 1727, and 1728). It is entirely possible that there were earlier trials in the gap years, but I did not find any in the volumes that remain.

60 NADH, RVP vol. 789-793. Some of the early volumes, such as this one, are missing page numbers, due to damage on the corners and margins.
in a few cases. With an average of two cases per year in the 1730s, the emergence of poison trials was steady, but low.

As with Bahia and Suriname, Virginian poison laws followed and were shaped by early cases that reflected local circumstances and concerns about poison. From 1730—the year of the first poison trial of a slave on record for Virginia—to 1748, a handful of cases had a significant impact on the emergence of particular ideas on the relationship between poison and people of African descent in the colony. Several early cases emphasized the direct threat enslaved poisoners could pose to their owners as targets, a theme that would be more prominent in Virginia than elsewhere for the rest of the century. Shortly after completing construction on the plantation Montpelier in Spotsylvania County in 1732, three enslaved Africans allegedly poisoned Ambrose Madison, resulting in a long languishing illness and his eventual death. Their conviction was the first of slaves for murdering their owners in Virginia, as well as the first conviction of slaves for poisoning; it would not be the last.61 The idea of enslaved poisoners slowly killing their owners, present in the earliest trials, became firmly embedded in Virginian poison discourse.

The Montpelier case also suggested another element that would become central to eighteenth-century Virginian poison cases: the enslaved medical practitioner with the capacity to both cause and cure afflictions. While the documentation of the 1732 case is sparse, the fact that Madison’s slaves received assistance from an unrelated man who allegedly had knowledge of poisons suggests a possible client/practitioner relationship.62 He would not have been alone. Enslaved medical practitioners were a prominent part of the Virginian landscape as early as

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61 Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 5-8, 70; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 82. See, for example: Trial of Eve, 23 January 1745, LVA Orange CCOB, vol. 4, p. 454-455, reel 31; Trial of Letty, 26 May 1748, LVA Orange CCOB, vol. 5, p. 113-114, reel 32.
62 Chambers, Murder at Montpelier, 11, 70-71.
1729, when the governor and council of Virginia freed a man named James Papaw as a reward for revealing his cures for yaws. Tellingly, as a condition of his freedom, he was required to continue to work for the government “until he [made] a discovery of some other secrets he [had] for expelling poison, and the cure of other diseases.” Europeans saw such ‘secret knowledge’ as both highly valuable and potentially dangerous, as slave owners both increasingly relied on enslaved medical practitioners and feared their potential as poisoners. Slaveholders’ unease was also rooted in the relationships between practitioners and other slaves. A runaway advertisement from 1745 of a middle-aged African man with “Marks of his Country” on his face referred to him as a “cunning, subtle Fellow” who “pretends to be a Doctor” among his “great Acquaintance.” This man was known and likely practiced medicine well beyond the boundaries of his plantation and his owner’s control. However, without proof of poisoning, until 1748 there was no legal framework for trying and punishing medical practitioners, even though links between enslaved medical practitioners and poison were present in early cases.

The new links slaveholders and colonial officials made between poison, sorcery, and slaves in 1720s Martinique was the result of a rise of poisoning incidents connected to Africans in the early eighteenth century. Slaves and livestock were crucial to sugar production; from the government’s perspective, the deaths of either from illnesses attributed to poison posed a dire economic threat to the colony. In this period, concern about poison shifted towards people of African descent and their specific threat to plantation production. The earliest surviving

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63 H. R. McIlwaine, ed., Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia (Richmond: The Virginia State Library, 1930) vol. 4, p. 199; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 92. Rewarding enslaved doctors for their cures was not uncommon in the British North American colonies. An enslaved man named Caesar in South Carolina received his freedom in 1749 for sharing his knowledge of curing snake bites in South Carolina; almanacs and recipe books continued to reprint his cure for the rest of the century. See Fett, Working Cures, 68-69; Parrish, American Curiosity, 287; Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 625-626.

64 Parrish, American Curiosity, 262; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 101-102.

collection of trial summaries from the Conseil Supérieur starts in 1726, but there are several reports of earlier instances of poisoning in the governors’ correspondence.\textsuperscript{66} A 1704 case, one of the only ones in the century involving an accusation between white people, involved a woman accusing her brother, a judge, of attempting to poison her, resulting in his flight to Guadeloupe. Governor Mithon de Senneville’s main concern was how to either find a replacement or convince the judge to return—hardly indicative of enough concern with poison to warrant new legislation.\textsuperscript{67} Within the decade, something very different was in play. At the top of his May 1712 report to the Ministère de la Marine, Governor Arnoul de Vaucresson related a long period of losses of both slaves and livestock to “illnesses so singular” that the slave owners did not know the cause. Suspecting their slaves of poisoning, several owners arrested their slaves, held them in irons on the plantations, and extracted confessions before sending them to the king’s prison. On more than one occasion, the governor had cause to report incidents of slaveholders arresting and torturing slaves they suspected of poisoning livestock.\textsuperscript{68} Further massive losses in 1729 led to more accusations of slaves as poisoners.\textsuperscript{69}

Martinican slaveholders often identified poison and suspected poisoners through the expertise of enslaved medical practitioners. One case from 1712 involved an enslaved man named François, who had claimed “particular knowledge in discovering poisons, spells, and

\textsuperscript{66} The Conseil Supérieur was an appeals court that covered criminal and civil cases of all individuals. Cases would have first been tried in the regional tribunals; however, all cases involving crimes with the potential for capital punishment—including poison—were automatically appealed to the council. Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}, 57.

\textsuperscript{67} Jean Jacques Mithon de Senneville to Comte de Pontchartrain, 2 October 1704, ANOM, Série C8 Correspondence à la arrive en provenance de la Martinique, box 15, f. 339.

\textsuperscript{68} Nicolas François Arnoul de Vaucresson to Comte de Pontchartrain, 22 May 1712, ANOM Série C8, box 18, f. 410; Nicolas François Arnoul de Vaucresson to Comte de Pontchartrain, 20 May 1713, ANOM Série C8, box 19, f. 341.

\textsuperscript{69} Charles Bernard to Joseph Jean Baptise Fleuriau d’Armenonville, 2 September 1720, ANOM Série C8a, box 27, f. 351.
those who give them.” François’ owner, Mr. David, had hired him out to detect poison during the crisis, collecting money from several of his neighbors. The court dropped the investigation of the alleged poisoners on a lack of proof, chastising both the slaveholders who had violently abused the suspected slaves and Mr. David for “tricking the public,” forcing him to return his neighbors’ money. The position of François, whom slave owners hired as an expert in identifying magical poisons and poisoners, is crucial as it suggests that slaveholders’ ideas regarding poison and who to suspect as a poisoner were strongly influenced by African slaves.

The 1740s was a decade of transition for poison cases across these four locations. A common and growing sense of crisis led to the creation of new laws in an effort to control both African practitioners and slaveholders for their increasing extrajudicial punishments of perceived poisoners on their plantations. In Bahia, the crisis began with a concerning rise in illnesses. In the early 1730s, Jesuits at the Engenho de Santa Anna reported being overwhelmed by the number of sick in their neighborhood. In 1741, the Conde das Galveas, Vice-roy of Brazil, tempered his generally positive report to the king with the observation of “great illnesses”—fluxes and people bleeding from the mouth—sweeping Salvador. By the fall of 1743, the sense of alarm in his report had dramatically increased, as over 5,000 had sickened and died in recent years, throwing the colony into an “unfortunate, and terrible” situation. While Galveas did not explicitly connect these illnesses to poison, it is unlikely to have been a coincidence that in the same year he had set in motion a new ordinance specifically on the subject. This ordinance made the administration of poison, even if it did not cause death, worthy of investigation, while

70 Vaucresson to Pontchartrain, 22 May 1712.
71 Vaucresson to Pontchartrain, 22 May 1712.
72 João Dias to P. Provintial, 28 July 1731, ANTT, Armário Jesuitico e Cartório dos Jesuitas, box 70, f. 380; Mattheus de Souza to P. Luis Valhozo, 13 January 1732, ANTT, Armário Jesuitico e Cartório dos Jesuitas, box 70, f. 166.
73 André de Melo e Castro to D. João V, 8 July 1741, AHU, Administração Central Bahia, box 71, f. 5959, reel 73.
74 André de Melo e Castro to D. João V, 30 September 1743, AHU, Administração Central Bahia, box 78, f. 6444, reel 79.
requiring places that sold poison to register with the state. Bahian slaveholders and the colonial
government described poison as a real and pressing threat. In the following decades,
denunciations to the Inquisition of causing illnesses through poison/feitiçaria, or for the
unsanctioned treatment of such afflictions, rose rapidly.

Similar to Bahia, the situation in Suriname changed dramatically in the first years of the
1740s. Chains of interlinked poison cases were particularly notable in the escalation. Not only
did the number of cases increase in the early 1740s—from sixteen cases in the 1730s to forty-two
from 1740 to 1745 alone—but also they were increasingly connected with each other.  
Interrogations and confessions, sometimes explicitly following torture, led the criminal court
from one case to another as they pushed for names of conspirators or any other known poisoners.
For example, over the summer of 1742 a man named Baron confessed—following torture—to
causing his mistress’ death by poisoning, having purchased herbs from one Abraham, an
enslaved man on another plantation, with the stated intent to “cool” her and avoid future
punishment. Baron also claimed to have received herbs from Coffij, who was owned by the
Society of Suriname itself; Coffij denied these accusations, but gave the court the names of
Askaan and Emanuel for poisoning other slaves, leading to their subsequent trials. From
Emanuel’s trial came that of Ajuba. Finally, Baron also accused one of the black drivers on his
plantation, Louis, of “going about with poison,” and Louis’ case in turn led to the trial of
Sambo. Of the forty-two cases in the early 1740s, eighteen involved at least one connection to
another case.

75 NADH, RVP vol. 787-798.
76 Proces van Baron, 10 May 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795; Proces van Louis, 10 May 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795;
Proces van Sambo, 10 May 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795; Proces van Abraham, 10 May 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795;
Proces van Coffij, 1 June 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795; Proces van Askaan, 1 Jun 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795;
Proces van Ajuba, 9 Jun 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795; Proces van Emanuel, 4 Aug 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795.
77 By ‘early 1740s’ I mean up through December 1745. NADH, RVP vol. 783-798.
As part of Suriname’s spike of cases in the early 1740s, both the number and proportion of cases involving medical practitioners expanded. Twenty cases involved at least one medical practitioner, and eighteen medical practitioners overall were tried—all were enslaved men of African descent.\(^7\) In several of the linked cases, there were networks of suppliers and an exchange of various herbs, powders, and other medical services for fees. One hub for these connections was the ongoing construction of the new Fort Amsterdam, where slaves from across the colony had been requisitioned from their plantations to work. In a chain of cases, completely separate from the one involving Baron—which did also include several people working at the fort—three slaves working on the fort were connected to both an alleged supplier of “pernicious and poisonous herbs” living in Paramaribo and a purchaser of these powders on a plantation on the Commewijne river.\(^7\) Networks extended out into the plantations. A man named April confessed to receiving a little tube filled with herbs from Jammie that could be used to kill—both worked at the fort. April then gave the names of several slaves from various plantations for buying and selling “poison” with each other.\(^8\) It was apparently common knowledge among slaves working at the fort that one Coffij had cured a boy there and announced in the slave quarters that he would find and get rid of all *vergif* (poison), later specified as “calabashes and other goods” hidden around the fort causing harm.\(^9\) The varied services of medical practitioners formed a web of connections across the colony that slaveholders and the colonial government described as alarmingly outside of their knowledge or control.

In Martinique, early poison events also contributed to colonial officials’ growing sense of crisis. A letter from the new governor in 1725 highlighted poisonings of slaves and animals—

\(^7\) Three separate cases involved the same medical practitioner, hence the odd numbers.
\(^8\) Proces van La Rocke, 1 Feb 1741, NADH, RVP vol. 794; Proces van André, 1 Feb 1741, NADH, RVP vol. 794; Proces van Tromp en Manuel, NADH, RVP vol. 794; Proces van Samson, 9 May 1741, NADH, RVP vol. 794.
\(^9\) Proces van April, 4 Aug 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795.
\(^8\) Proces van Coffij, 1 Jun 1742.
framed as a disastrous economic loss for slaveholders—in a litany of woes that amounted to a “total derangement of affairs,” including colonists’ debts, high food prices, and floods.82 While the language of the 1724 edict emphasized the threat of enslaved poisoners on the lives of European colonists, the reports from the colony itself reflected a greater concern with the loss of livelihood.83 Reports on poison up to the 1740s mainly discussed the mysterious illnesses and deaths of slaves and livestock as losses of valuable property. Alleged poisonings and their potential damage to the growing plantation boom made poison cases a key subject of government concern.

Slaveholders’ concerns with alleged slave poisoners also began to shape colonial policy. Deeming the 1724 edict insufficient to handle the particular circumstances of poisoning in the colony, two years after its passage the Conseil Supérieur of Martinique proposed the creation of special itinerant courts specifically to try poison cases on the plantations where accusations were made. The goal of such a court was swift trials and executions, with no opportunity for appeal, and its existence would have symbolically shifted the site of judicial power from the urban tribunals to the plantations themselves. With no official response, the proposal died; however, its central ideas would feed into the creation of special rules and tribunals for poison cases in the future.84

The legal connection between poison, medicine, and enslaved practitioners came in Virginia in 1748, with a law making the practice of medicine by slaves a felony, justified by the

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82 Marquis de Feuquières to Comte de Maurepas, 30 October 1725, ANOM Série C8a, box 34, f. 113.  
83 There was one early case with a white slaveholder as a target, the trial and hanging of an enslaved woman named Rose for attempting to poison her master with ver de gris. Procès de Rose, September 1734, ANOM Série F3, vol. 244, p. 130.  
84 Pluchon, Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs de Saint-Domingue à Haïti, 153-154; Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 161. Cooperation and tension between slaveholders and the colonial government over masters’ rights to violence and judgment towards their slaves remained a recurring theme throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Caroline Oudin-Bastide discusses poison cases in this framework, as the key site of conflict. See Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, especially “Chapter 3 Le maître: juge naturel de l’esclave? Petits arrangements avec le droit.”
threat of poison. According to this act, many slaves “under pretence of practising physic, have prepared and exhibited poisonous medicines.” The kinds of illnesses the law blamed on these medical practitioners—“long and tedious indispositions,” sometimes resulting in death—were exactly the kinds of illnesses involved in early accusations of poisoning. To avoid “such pernicious and dangerous practices,” the law forbade slaves from practicing medicine of any kind, under pain of death. Two key provisions tempered this death sentence. First, if the court determined that the medicine was not made or given with “ill intent, nor attended with any bad consequences,” the court could choose a more lenient punishment—in practice, a standard brand mark on the hand and thirty-nine lashes at the whipping post. Second, this law would not apply to slaves administering medicine with the mutual knowledge and consent of all of the slaveholders involved.85

Both provisions offer insight into ways colonial political leaders were forging new conceptions of and associations with poison. The idea that “preparing, exhibiting, or administering” a medicine deemed “poisonous” could be done without “ill-intent” was in direct contrast with contemporary English law; there poisoning, “the most detestable of all” crimes, could not be tried as manslaughter, as “it carries with it an internal evidence of cool and deliberate malice.”86 By eliminating the need for proof of harm or ill intent to try slaves for “poisonous medicines,” the Virginia legislature gave county courts the flexibility to punish those with the perceived potential to poison. The second provision makes clear that this law was designed to police enslaved medical practitioners as much as it was to prevent possible poisonings. By framing enslaved medical practitioners as a threat—their practice a possible front

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86 William Blackstone, ed., *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), book 4, p. 193, 196. Poison was considered so inherently abhorrent in English law that Henry VIII ruled that boiling to death—the most extreme punishment allowable in common law—was the only fit punishment.
for nefarious deeds, the medicines they created ‘poisonous’—while leaving an opening for slaveholders’ controlled use of these practitioners, the law placed the power to sanction medical practice in the hands of slaveholders. Codifying the existing precarious position of the enslaved medical practitioner, and linking their ability to cause and treat afflictions with poison, the 1748 law established the base from which subsequent poison trials would launch.

In Suriname, the governor and court struggled to maintain control over the poison situation in the early 1740s, referred to by Governor Mauicius as “one of the greatest troubles today of this land.”87 One way was through public and extreme executions intended as a deterrent. This is not to say that executions were not gruesome before; several cases in the 1730s ended with beheadings, burning at the stake, and bodies broken on the wheel. However, the increasingly favored punishment in the 1740s involved branding and pinching with hot tongs until dead, then displaying the head on a spike in the Suriname river—this was the fate of Baron, Sambo, Abraham, and Emanuel in the chain of cases above.88 However, by 1745 the governor believed that these grisly executions were ineffective, as “this rabble does not fear death” or even “the most wretched tortments.”89 The court decided it was necessary to try new tactics.

While a brief December 1745 ordinance addressing poison cases in Suriname did not expand its definition or alter what constituted poison in eyes of the law, through the proposed changes to punishments it specifically targeted the networks of connections that had grown between slaves and medical practitioners. The Society began by acknowledging that more and more slaves “[went] about with poison,” undeterred by execution because they believed they

87 Governeur Mauicius to Sociëteit van Suriname, 8 May 1745, NADH, Sociëteit van Suriname (SVS) vol. 275, p. 766-775, reel 3102.
88 Proces van Baron, 10 May 1742; Proces van Sambo, 10 May 1742; Proces van Abraham, 10 May 1742; Proces van Emanuel, 4 August 1742. The outcomes of the cases of Coffij, Askaan, and Ajuba are unclear, as the documentation for their trials ends abruptly after their interrogations.
89 Governeur Mauicius to Sociëteit van Suriname, 8 May 1745.
would return to their homelands upon death. As a new punishment, slaves convicted of poisoning another slave or livestock would have their tongues removed, their forehead branded, and would be sent to work in chains in Fort Amsterdam. The ordinance emphasized the isolation of these convicts, “secluded and without communication and meeting,” from other slaves, “so that they never have a community.” The Society did not continue this practice for long—I have found no mention of such a punishment for poisoning used after the 1740s—but it was the fate of at least three men. The Society tried to solve the poison crisis by breaking webs of connection and communication among people of African descent, but cases with medical practitioners and their networks continued for decades.

By the early 1740s, colonial officials added a final element to the legal discourse on alleged poisoners of African descent in Martinique: medical practice. While earlier cases had identified slaves generally as suspected poisoners, by 1741 the Conseil Supérieur specifically attributed the deaths of slaves and livestock to particular slaves’ abuse of medical knowledge, creating poisonous powders and drugs from plants and distributing them under the guise of remedies to other slaves. While slaves and livestock were the primary target of this alleged practice, causing economic ruin to plantations, the council raised the specter of these enslaved medical practitioners turning their skills towards “recremition” against their owners or against whites who “trespass on their debauches.” Furthermore, they argued that it would be impossible to distinguish medical practice from poisoning, as practitioners carefully guarded knowledge of the composition of their “poisons” and other slaves would not denounce them for fear of becoming their victims. As with Virginia, the council concluded that slaves should be banned

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91 Proces van Goliath, 18 December 1745, NADH, RVP vol. 798; Proces van Philip, 18 December 1745, NADH, RVP vol. 798; Proces van Bossoe, 18 December 1745, NADH, RVP vol. 798.
from giving “any remedies, powders, or drugs for any malady.” The enslaved medical practitioner, feared by both slaveholders and slaves and empowered by dangerous knowledge, began to emerge as a central figure in poison cases.

Suspicion of medical practitioners in this colony became enough to try individuals as potential poisoners, even when there was no specific accusation of causing affliction. In 1742, the Conseil Supérieur heard the case of Jean François, who confessed to distributing “remedies and specifics” across “many quarters of the island.” Further investigation turned up no accusations of poisoning, and no indications of either harm or ill intent. The court was now in difficulty deciding how to proceed; while the council’s proposed law from the year before would have made Jean François’ medical practices a crime, they had not yet received a royal ordinance making such prosecution legal. With no proof of poisoning, the court could not order his execution; the case ended with an unresolved debate whether to keep Jean François safely in irons or to transport him from the colony. Within the year, however, the royal ordinance arrived, forbidding slaves from practicing medicine on the exact terms that had been proposed by the colonial council. The preface of the 1743 declaration blamed enslaved medical practitioners for the losses of slaves and livestock due to their knowledge “of the properties of certain plants and herbs” to treat illnesses. This declaration was framed as an extension of the 1724 edict, adding medical practice to maléfice and vénéfice and tying all of these practices to enslaved

92 Marquis de Champigny de Noroy and César Marie de La Croix to Compte de Maurepas, 8 October 1741, ANOM Série C8a, box 53, f. 207. This letter is fascinating, as it is intended to alert the Ministère de la Marine of the Conseil Supérieur’s overstepping of their legal authority to establish law. It ends with a request for a royal ordinance on the subject. For more on European conceptions of links between Africa, Africans, and venomous snakes, see Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 144-145.
93 Procès de Jean François, January 1742.
94 Déclaration du roi qui interdit aux nègres esclaves des îles de fabriquer ou de distribuer aucun remède, et qui ordonne l'exécution de l'édit de février 1724 sur les empoisonneurs, 1 February 1743, ANOM Série A, vol. 25, f. 199.
practitioners. By legally bundling medicine with poison, sorcery, and slaves, the colonial
government set the stage for the boom in trials centered on this specific relationship.

Acceleration

Once early trials and poison laws in each of these locations had established concrete
connections between poison, medicine, sorcery, and slaves, the number of cases accelerated to
peaks in the mid-eighteenth century. The increase in early cases and connections to medical
practitioners within them were connected to the growing African born population in each locale.
As cases became intertwined with new legal regimes, they began to take on a life of their own.
Trials operated in a feedback loop as poison cases built on each other—either directly, through
chains of trials, or indirectly through the circulation of knowledge about specific cases, as they
reinforced slaveholders and colonial officials’ specific ideas about who poisoners were and how
they operated. Trials in these peak decades were fairly consistent and remarkably similar
between locations, as the ideas that had been forged during the period of emergence perpetuated
and sustained themselves.

With variations in the duration and timing, white investigations connecting poison,
medicine, and people of African descent accelerated to a mid-century peak across these four
slave societies of the western Atlantic. Half of the twelve full trials originating in Bahia from
1680 to 1802 came from the decades between 1740 and 1769, as did forty-six of the eighty-one
feitiçaria investigations in the cadernos do promotor. The number of cases per year reached a
peak with eight cases in 1750 alone.95 The proportion of feitiçaria accusations in the cadernos to
the total reflects increased local concern, as it rose from 26% from 1700 to 1739 to 51% from

95 ANTT, IL Series 28; ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 55-131. The four full trials from 1750, all of people of African
descent, were interconnected cases involving bolsas de mandinga made with pieces of consecrated host in the
backcounty town of Jacobina. Luiz Mott discusses these cases in detail in Mott, Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade, 99-
117.
Poison cases in Virginia after 1748 also accelerated dramatically. From 1730 to 1748, there were only five poison cases in the colony; in the 1750s this number shot up to thirty cases, then fifty-six cases in the 1760s and a peak of sixty-five cases in the 1770s. This decades long rise and peak only began to drop in the 1780s, with twenty-three cases from 1780 to 1784. Over the eighteenth century, more slaves were accused of poisoning in Virginia than for any other crime except theft. Martinique poison cases accelerated to their first peak in the mid 1750s, with thirty-six cases in that decade alone. Poison trials peaked in Suriname in the 1740s, but remained at a high plateau that only began to falter after the mid-1770s. However, the relative position of poison cases in the context of all trials did diminish over time. Surviving trial data for Berbice is much more limited than for Suriname, but the poison cases for the colony are suggestive of similar patterns. Berbice’s criminal court records from 1764 to 1792 contained four poison cases, with none after 1775. Poison trials in Suriname did not disappear as completely as they did in Berbice, but after 1775 the steady number of cases per year dropped to a sporadic trickle.

Martinique had the longest ‘peak’ period of poison cases due to the creation of an institutional precedent of special tribunals, the organized spread of information on cases, and legal maneuvering to make convictions easier to obtain. In addition to ordering all poison ordinances to be circulated around the island, the Conseil Supérieur also attached a short

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96 ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 55-131. The volume numbers to not always correspond with chronological order.
97 Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 39, 92. In his sampling of county court records, Philip Morgan counted 175 poison trials from the eighteenth-century. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 613-614.
98 ANOM, Série F3, vol. 244-246.
99 The immediate aftermath and impact of the 1745 government ordinance on poison is difficult to detect, as volumes for trials in 1746, 1749, and most of the 1750s have not survived. The robust number of cases in the 1760s and early 1770s do suggest continued concern with poison.
100 From 1735 to 1739, poison cases had made up 10% of all trials and 19% of all trials involving slaves, but another five-year sample from 1761 to 1765 shows a drop to 5% of total cases, and 6% of those involving slaves. NADH, RVP vol. 789-793, 805-811.
102 NADH, RVP vol. 829-836.
commentary at the end of their report to the metropole of one of these poison trials on the common knowledge in the colony of what enslaved poisoners did and the court’s theories as to why. In at least one case, an enslaved man who was implicated but released in relation to one trial ended up before the court again three years later—his earlier association with poisoning had made him a suspicious character. This circulation of knowledge regarding poison trials no doubt helped perpetuate awareness and accusations from slave owners.

Coinciding with the increase in accusations, colonial officials in Martinique grappled with a central problem in poison trials: the lack of proof. Frustrated with the paucity of what the law considered reliable evidence—often forced to rely on testimony from other slaves alone—colonial officials passed an ordinance in 1749 requiring slaveholders to call a surgeon to perform an autopsy on the bodies of any slaves or livestock they suspected of having been poisoned. The language of the ordinance was dire, warning that “We can no longer ignore that this crime is real and even common among the slaves,” and that action must be taken to “not only stop the spreading [of poisonings], but extirpate [it], if possible, to the root.” Both this ordinance, and a 1758 update reaffirming it, were printed and posted to church doors throughout the colony, further spreading awareness of poison.

However, mandating autopsy reports as evidence was not enough; the legislature also worked to bypass rules of evidence that they claimed made poison cases too difficult to prosecute. They did so with the creation of an extraordinary commission specifically to try

104 Procès de Paul et Nanette, March 1769, ANOM Série F3, vol. 246, p. 617-619. For the earlier case, where Paul was questioned but released, see Procès de Jean Baptiste et outres, May 1766, ANOM Série F3, vol. 246, p. 267-275.
106 Ordonnance concernant les nègres empoisonneurs, 5 November 1749; Ordonnance concernant les nègres et autre personnes empoisonnés, 12 November 1758, ADM Série B, vol. 9, p. 91-92. The 1758 update also mandated that surgeons perform this service for free, to further encourage slaveholders to use them for autopsies.
poison cases. Unlike the ordinary tribunal courts in Saint Pierre and Trinité, where people were tried then sent on an automatic appeal for felony crimes to the Conseil Supérieur in Fort Royal, these special poison tribunals were mobile, meeting on the plantations where the accusations originated, and had a lower standard of proof for conviction (automatic appeals still went to the council in Fort Royal).\textsuperscript{107} The number of cases per year leapt forward after 1753, peaking with ten cases in 1755 alone.\textsuperscript{108} In addition to enabling the 1750s peak, the establishment of special rules for Martinique poison cases set an important legal precedent that allowed for further waves of cases in the early nineteenth century.

Demographic patterns of the accused were strikingly consistent across the four locations of this study and stable over the mid-eighteenth century: alleged poisoners brought to court were overwhelmingly African or of African descent, nearly all enslaved, and mostly male.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Accused</th>
<th>Medical Practitioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total People</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Descent</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enslaved</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Black</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Volumes for 1747-1748 are fragments, missing data for the years 1746, 1749, 1751, 1755-60

\textsuperscript{**}Percentage of total people accused

\textsuperscript{107} Maxim de Bompar and Charles Marin Hurson to Antoine Louis Rouillé, 16 June 1753, ANOM Série C8a, box 60, f. 7; Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}, 71-72, 128-130. For more on the structure of extraordinary commissions in Martinique in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see p. 60-68.

\textsuperscript{108} ANOM, Série F3, vol. 244-246.
Table 2.3: Demographics of Slaves Accused in Virginia Poison Cases, Brunswick & Cumberland Counties, 1740-1799

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Slaves Accused</th>
<th>Medical Practitioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total People</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage of total slaves accused of poisoning

Source: County Court Order Books for Brunswick and Cumberland Counties, Library of Virginia.

Table 2.4: Demographics in Martinique Poison Cases, 1742-1769*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Accused</th>
<th>Medical Practitioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total People</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Descent</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enslaved</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Black</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data missing for the years 1749 and 1760-1764
**Percentage of total people accused

Source: Annales du Conseil souverain de la Martinique (1726-1778), Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, volumes 244-246, ANOM

Table 2.5: Demographics in Bahia Feitiçaria* Cases, 1740-1769

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Accused</th>
<th>Medical Practitioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total People</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Descent</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enslaved</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Black</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I am using feitiçaria as an umbrella term here for cases involving magic in some capacity, including calundús, bolsas de mandinga, love magic, superstition, divination, and maleficio.

**Percentage of total people accused

Source: Inquisição de Lisbo, Procesos de Fé and Cadernos do Promotor

125
In fact, for Suriname, from 1740 to 1779 the criminal court did not try a single white or indigenous person for poison, and free blacks accounted for only 5% of the accused. For Virginia’s Brunswick and Cumberland Counties, of the forty-two slaves tried in twenty-seven cases I have examined from 1740 to 1799, men made up 64% of the accused. The gender ratio was most dramatically weighted towards men in the 1760s and 70s, but shifted towards a more even ratio with women holding a slight majority by the 1708s. The mid-eighteenth-century data from the Martinique Conseil Supérieur records is striking. Only a single case involved the accusation of a white person—a widow tried, but acquitted, for poisoning her recently deceased husband—and even this case involved two enslaved women as alleged accomplices. Poison was a crime associated with people of African descent, and particularly slaves; white people simply were not tried as poisoners in Martinique. Furthermore, the courts tried men much more frequently than women for poisoning, a reversal from contemporary French trials and cultural assumptions. These patterns were even sharper for accused individuals who were identified as medical practitioners. These trials, especially those of healers, perpetuated and continuously

109 Trials of whites for poisoning were rare in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The one exception was the sensational trial for the murder of George Wythe in 1806 with arsenic laced coffee, allegedly by his great-nephew over an issue with his inheritance. Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 94; Friedman, A History of American Law, 227; Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 92.


111 Mollenauer, Strange Revelations, 55-56, fn. 18 p. 154. The prevalence of men in Martinique poison cases cannot be accounted for by gender disparities among slaves alone, as men made up only 52% of the adult enslaved population in the 1762 census, and dropped to a 45% minority by 1803. Governor William Rufane to Egremont (transmits ‘recensement’ of 1762), 16 July 1762, NA-Kew, CO 166 Secretary of State for the Colonies and War and Colonial Department: Martinique, box 2, f. 41; “État Général du recensement de l’île Martinique (1803),” ANOM Dépot des Papiers Publics des Colonies (DPPC), box 507. Caroline Oudin-Bastide’s estimates for the mid-eighteenth century puts men at 57% of the enslaved population. Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 165. It is also important to note that the crime of poison actually had a closer gender ratio than the average for all 432 trials of people of African decent in this period, where 95% were men. ANOM, Série F3, vol. 244-246. However, the gender distinction between Martinique and French poison cases is still significant as it indicates that, at least for cases that came to trial, the central idea of who was a poisoner had changed between Europe and the Caribbean.
reinforced the links between poison, slaves, and medical practitioners that had been forged earlier in the eighteenth century.

In Bahia, the accused in feitiçaria investigations were demographically much more diverse than poison cases in the other colonies, involving higher ratios of women, free blacks, and whites. The higher proportion of free blacks to slaves involved in these cases is consistent with the relatively higher rates of manumission and numbers of free blacks in colonial Brazil than in other Caribbean slave societies.\footnote{Schwartz, \textit{Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society}, 462. For more on free blacks in colonial Brazil, see A. J. R. Russell-Wood, \textit{The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982).} The gender gap is more intriguing, especially as there was a sharp difference between denunciations in the cadernos, where women outnumbered men 52\% to 48\%, and the six full trials from these decades, which were exclusively of men. In fact, of the twelve total trials from the entire period of this study, there was only a single female defendant, in 1699.\footnote{ANTT Series 28; ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 55-131. Processo de Gracia, 1699. The high numbers of women accused of feitiçaria crimes is also inconsistent with the gender ratios for the total denunciations originating in mid-century Bahia, 73\% of which involved men. This percentage comes from comparative data from 1671 to 1802 taken from the index to the cadernos. The index is incomplete, but contains over 750 pages of basic information on cases entered into the cadernos. Indice Incompleto do Promotor, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 328.}

Closer examination of different kinds of cases under the umbrella of feitiçaria reveals specific demographic associations. People of African descent were a majority of the accused across the board, although to varying degrees. Cases involving love magic were the most diverse, with close to even ratios between genders and among slaves, free blacks, and whites.\footnote{Cases involving love magic were relatively numerous and connected primarily to women in contemporary Iberia compared to the rest of Western Europe, Ankarloo and Clark, \textit{Witchcraft and Magic in Europe}, 133. Love magic was also common in the Spanish Caribbean. For a study on the connections between love magic, poison, and medicine in seventeenth-century Cartagena, see von Germeten, \textit{Violent Delights, Violent Ends}, 103-123.} Accusations of possessing bolsas da mandinga also included a fairly wide social spectrum, although tilted heavily towards men. The social diversity for bolsas is unsurprising, given their
common use across the Portuguese Atlantic. However, people accused of participation in *calundús* were not only overwhelmingly of African descent, but predominantly female as well. This pattern also held for individuals specifically identified as medical practitioners, even if their clientele was diverse.\(^\text{116}\)

While the four locations varied in the primary targets of alleged poisoning, medical practitioners featured prominently. If the denunciations in the *cadernos* entries from Bahia serve as a measure for public concern, then they indicated great if not greater alarm regarding illicit healing methods to treat poisons or *feitiços* than the infliction of harm through sorcery. From 1740 to 1769, *feitiçaria* accusations involving cures—some, but not all, of which were explicitly conducted through *calundús*—consistently outnumbered those involving some sort of specific harm.\(^\text{117}\) The relative degree of concern with practices over instances of harm is also evident in the alleged targets referenced by the *cadernos* cases. In thirty-two of the forty-six *feitiçaria* cases in the *cadernos* in these decades, a full 70%, there was no specific target.\(^\text{118}\) Accusations of healing and harm were closely entwined, as the knowledge to cure and that to kill went hand in hand.\(^\text{119}\)

Unlike Bahia, alleged poisonings in Suriname and Martinique were primarily aggressive, with a high percentage of cases involving harm caused to specific individuals—slaves, in

\(^\text{115}\) Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 179-183; Santos, *As bolsas de mandinga no espaço Atlântico*, particularly “Chapter 1 Amuletos Protectores na África” and “Chapter 2 A Circulação de Pessoas e Saberes no Atlântico—As Bolsas de Mandinga.” For a study of bolsas in Portugal, see Calainho, *Metrópole das mandingas*.

\(^\text{116}\) ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 55-131. Only a single white person was accused of being a medical practitioner in a *feitiçaria* case in this period: Francisca Rodrigues, a children’s teacher who allegedly taught *malefícios* and performed cures in her home with both “Calundus” and relics. Denúncia de Francisca Rodrigues e outros, 28 April 1753, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 113, p. 187.


\(^\text{118}\) ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 55-131.

\(^\text{119}\) Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 161; Sweet, Domingos Álvares, *African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World*, 196. See, for example: Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 21 October 1749; Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 25 July 1746, ANTT, IL Series 30, vol. 118, p. 90-94. This case is also interesting as it offers a rare glimpse of local judicial proceedings regarding feitiçaria. At the time of the denunciation of Maria Monjola and Miguel, local authorities already held them in the Jacobina jail.
particular. Of the ninety-four Suriname cases from 1740 to 1779, 57% involved enslaved targets. No other category came close. In Martinique, slaves were the alleged targets in a 35% plurality of the 51 poison cases from 1740 to 1769. The high numbers of enslaved targets suggest that alleged poisonings had as much if not more to do with relationships among slaves as between slaves and slave owners. However, the policing of medical practice by slaveholders was significant in both Suriname and Martinique; courts in both colonies prosecuted numerous medical practitioners, whether or not there was an alleged target in the case. In fact, ten of the nineteen cases involving healers of African descent from 1740 to 1769 in Martinique, and ten of the forty-three such cases in Suriname from 1740 to 1779, had no stated target—indicating that policing these healers was as important as bringing them to court for active poisonings.

Virginian courts were also deeply concerned with the potential physical threat of enslaved medical practitioners of African descent, through primarily directed towards their owners. Virginia differed from Martinique, Bahia, and the Dutch Guianas by having a much higher proportion of whites, and especially slaveholders, among the alleged targets of poisoning. Of the twenty-seven cases from Brunswick and Cumberland counties from 1740 to 1799, 44% involved whites as the targets, with six cases specifically involving slaveholders.

The remaining breakdown of cases is as follows: 13% of cases had the owner as the target, 9% had another white person, 10% had livestock, 17% had no target at all, and not a single case had a free person of color as a target. NADH, RVP vol. 793-836. Three of the cases (3%) were damaged so that it is unclear who the target was. In eight cases (9%) there were multiple targets.

ANOM, Série F3, vol. 244-246. The full breakdown of the targets in the 51 cases from 1740-1769 is as follows: 18 cases with slaves (35%), 5 with owners of the accused (10%), 2 with other whites (4%), 7 with livestock (14%), 12 with no target (24%), 10 with not enough information to specify a target (20%). It is important to note that several of these cases had multiple targets, so some cases counted for multiple categories.

LVA CCOB from Amelia, Brunswick, Caroline, Cumberland, Goochland, Orange, Powhatan, and Spotsylvania counties; Randolph Roth, “Historical Violence Database: Homicide among Adults in Maryland, 1635-1762, and Virginia, 1607-1900,” created October 2009 (accessed June 2016). This data is consistent with Schwarz’s observations for the 179 cases he examined from 1706-1784, with 50% of the cases having a white target, 26% with an enslaved target, and 24% with no identified target. See Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 96.
practitioners were involved in several of these cases. Virginia also stands out for having the highest proportion of cases involving medical practitioners, who made up a majority of the people accused from 1740 to 1799.

During the peak decades of poison cases, medical practitioners were the central figures and their practices continued to drive government discourse and legislation on poison across the slave societies of the western Atlantic. In Suriname, the members of the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice considered medical practitioners to be a serious threat, even if they did not always believe their practices to be efficacious within their definitions of poison. Taming services—sold to enslaved clients to “soften” or “cool” their owners and make their lives easier, appeared in several Suriname poison cases. One case in 1749 gave the court an opportunity to discuss the implications of taming practices. The court tried an enslaved medical practitioner, Bettie, for “poisoning” her owner—upon examination, the court determined that the suspected substance she had given him was not technically vergift (poison) with a physical effect, but something that slaves used to put their owners “in a good humor.” The court determined that this and other such “superstitions” were still “evil and dangerous,” and their use, whether to “poison their owner or slaves” should be punished. While the court described taming as a superstitious practice, in other cases they took medical practitioners’ knowledge of poisons very seriously. In fact, another woman named Bettie in 1766 was able to at least delay her execution by agreeing to work with a Dr. Moedner to conduct experiments on the various poisons and counter-poisons

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125 For example, see Proces van Apollo, 4 August 1742, NADH, RVP vol. 795; Proces van Osirus, Amanthea, en Macenissa, 25 August 1769, NADH, RVP vol. 816, p. 29-31v.
that she knew. Medical practitioners of African descent were the key to Suriname poison cases.

Recurring language and content in Virginian and Martinican poison trials also highlight the outsized significance of these medical practitioners. Of the twenty-seven Brunswick and Cumberland Country cases in the peak decades, just over half involved medical practitioners who were frequently accused of preparing, exhibiting, distributing, and sometimes administering “poisonous medicines.” After 1748, the number of cases for “poisonous medicines” increased significantly and in tandem with cases with no target. This phrase, which did not appear in cases or law before 1748, now appeared in a majority of cases up to the end of the century. In Martinique, the content of these cases consistently linked “poison” with both secret knowledge of “drogues” and invocations of maléfice—evil spells. In the Martinican trials of the mid-eighteenth century, the expression “poison et maléfice” appeared in just under half of the forty-six poison cases from 1740 to 1769. “Drogues,” sometimes specified as being made from herbs and roots and often ground into powders, appeared in over a third as a possible threat grounded in secret knowledge.

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127 Dinsdag den 12 Augustus 1766, NADH SVS Resoluties van Gouverneur en Raden, vol. 158. This detail appears in the SVS resolutions; it is unclear how long Bettie’s execution was delayed for or if it was suspended. For her trial, where she stood two others were sentenced to burn for allegedly poisoning other slaves, see Proces van Sara, Januarij, en Bettie, 4 August 1766, NADH RVP vol. 812.

128 For example, see: Trial of Isaac and Quash, 29 May 1759, LVA Cumberland CCOB, vol. 1758-62, p. 56-57, reel 23.

129 LVA CCOB from Brunswick and Cumberland Counties

130 Since the 1682 Affair of the Poisons, the legal definition of maléfice had been “pretended magic,” but in the French Caribbean colonies the term was used almost synonymously and frequently in conjunction with “poison.” Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 23-27, see the entirety of “Chapter 1 Poisons et maléfices”; Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery, 255-256.

131 ANOM Série F3, vol. 244-246; Pluchon, Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs de Saint-Domingue à Haïti, 156-158. Strikingly, given courts’ concerns in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, few of these mid-century cases involved specifically identified mineral poisons, such as arsenic. Only three cases, one from 1747 and two from 1755, mentioned arsenic at all, and one was ruled an accident (a young enslaved boy had unknowingly transported drugs that had been carelessly mixed with arsenic by his owner). Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 31; Procès d’un petit negre, March 1755, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 312-314 (accident); Procès de Confident, May 1755, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 346-350; Procès d’une negresse, November 1747, ANOM Série F3, vol. 244, p. 613-614.
Courts in Virginia and Martinique associated medical practitioners of African descent so firmly with poison that for a slave to seek the services of such a practitioner was inherently suspicious. In 1771 Virginia, Sharper’s owner had him arrested for “Endeavouring [sic] to Procur[e] Poison from a Negroe Doctor or Conjurer as they are Call’d but for what Purpose unknown”; his purpose was later referred to as “his Intended Villiany [sic].”¹³² Simply the possession of unknown substances could be cause for alarm, as was the case in 1753 Martinique, when an enslaved man was branded and whipped for carrying “suspicious and unknown drugs,” the use of which “could be nothing but very prejudicial.”¹³³ Sometimes captured maroons were found carrying such “suspicious drugs,” which they claimed were for curing snakebites, protection from gunshots, or what the court vaguely termed “superstitious practices.”¹³⁴

Martinique is unusual among the cases in the study for experiencing secondary peaks in poison cases as large or larger as that in the 1750s, followed by a sharp drop. Unfortunately, data from the last quarter of the eighteenth century is sparse. The surviving trials in the Conseil Supérieur records end at 1774, and the next body of consistent court data for all crimes was for the new assize courts that begin in 1830. However, official correspondence and the records of the explosive 1822-1827 Cour Prévôtale indicate two major waves of trials conducted under special tribunals.

The first tribunal of 1803 to 1809, established by Captain-General Louis Thomas Villaret-Joyeuse, operated in the context of the Napoleonic wars in the years between the first and second British occupations of the island. Villaret-Joyeuse directed his attention to the

¹³³ He was convicted “d’avoir porté sur luy des poudres et Drogues suspectes et inconnues, et dont les usages et consequences ne pouvoient etre que très prejudicable…” Procès de Pierre dit Cartouche, January 1753, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 111-112.
poisoning of slaves and livestock as an urgent crisis to be dealt with along with acts of arson and runaways stealing canoes to escape to British islands. Building off of the 1753 precedent of having extraordinary rules for poison cases, he established an itinerant tribunal, made up of both government officials and local notable slave owners, to swiftly try these three kinds of cases. Executions, usually burning at the stake for poisoning, were held on site immediately following the trial, with no opportunity for appeal. Within two years Villaret-Joyeuse reported success in that the “blight of poisonings,” both “terrible and too familiar to Martinique’s plantations,” was being diminished thanks to the special tribunal.

Villaret-Joyeuse’ tribunal obtained results, with a large number of poison trials and executions. An exact recording of the numbers involved has not survived, but the contemporary journal of colonial prefect Pierre-Clément de Laussat contained about a dozen detailed anecdotes of cases involving alleged conspiracies with networks of medical practitioners. The frequency and severity of the trials did not stop the alleged epidemic of poisoning, and trials continued right up to start of the second British occupation in February 1809. Nor did the occupation stop poison prosecutions; the new British governor continued the tribunals and the prominent role of

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135 Arrêté de Villaret-Joyeuse portant création d'un tribunal spécial qui sera chargé de juger les crimes d'empoisonnements, incendies et enlèvements de canots et pirogues commis par les esclaves, 17 October 1803, ANOM Série C8a, box 107, f. 188; Arrêté relatif à l'établissement d'un tribunal spécial, 21 October 1803, ADM Série B, vol. 24, p. 57-60. Villeret-Joyeuse attached a copy of this act in a letter to the Ministère de la Marine. For the cover letter, see: Louis Thomas Villaret de Joyeuse to Denis Decrés, 28 November 1803, ANOM Série C8a, box 107, f. 112.

136 Louis Thomas Villaret de Joyeuse to Pierre Clément de Laussat, 9 June 1805, ANOM Série C8a, box 111, f. 111.

137 16 September 1807 to 8 November 1807, Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, ADM Série J24 Fonds Pierre-Clément de Laussat, vol. 1, p. 83-94. This manuscript was part of Laussat’s preparation for writing his memoir of his time in Martinique, published in 1831. The entries are the original text from his journals and have their original dates, copied out and rearranged into Laussat’s planned chapters. Some entries were repeated when information from them appeared in multiple sections. For the published memoir, see Pierre-Clément de Laussat, Mémoires sur ma vie à mon fils: Pendant les années 1803 et suivants (Pau: É. Vignancour, imprimeur, 1831).

138 Louis Thomas Villaret de Joyeuse to Denis Decrés, 2 April 1808, ANOM Série C8a, box 116, f. 17.
local slaveholders in their prosecution. The connections evident in earlier poison cases continued into the nineteenth century, enabled by legal precedents allowing for the special treatment of poison.

The Cour Prévôtale, a special tribunal operating from 1822 to 1827 exclusively for trying slaves and free people of color for poisoning, was both an extension of the patterns and precedents from the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century cases, and a moment of transition to the decline of these patterns. Preparation for the court began a few years after the return of Martinique to French hands. Operating under the conclusion that too many suspected poisoners could escape justice in the ordinary tribunals, and explicitly drawing from the legal precedent of Villaret-Joyeuse’s tribunal, Governor Donzelot called for the implementation of extraordinary measures “to satisfy justice” and “produce a beneficial terror.” Relaxing the rules of evidence resulted in a staggering number of defendants and convictions: over thirty cases—most operating as omnibus trials covering multiple defendants from a single area—the court tried 368 people for poisoning, resulting in 289 convictions and 104 executions. While the numbers of people involved in the Cour Prévôtale cases were much larger than trials in the eighteenth century, several patterns continued. The demographics of people accused in the Cour Prévôtale shared similarities with the mid-eighteenth-century trials, though men outnumbered women to a lesser degree.

However, several important differences reveal how poison trials had begun to change, and mark the Cour Prévôtale as a moment of transformation of these connections and patterns as

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139 From April 1809 to October 1811 alone, the tribunal tried 203 slaves and free people of color, mainly for poisoning, resulting in 66 executions; from 1809 to 1815 the tribunal sentenced 127 people to die. Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 63-64.
141 ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale. The trial summaries of the court are in a single volume.
much as it was their most heightened expression. The proportion of medical practitioners among the accused sharply declined, amounting to only 7%, and there was only a single case involving no target.\textsuperscript{142} Instead, a significant proportion of the accused were identified as the most loyal or favored slaves; this connection was presented as common knowledge in Donzelot’s report on the foundation of the tribunal.\textsuperscript{143} References to \textit{maléfice} decreased, appearing in only three trials, while together mineral poisons appeared in 40% of the cases—arsenic in particular was enough of a concern for Donzelot to issue new restrictions on its legal sale.\textsuperscript{144} Patterns of cases where the accused were more likely to be female, used mineral poisons, and were connected to positions of the greatest proximity to slaveholders—especially domestics—would replace that of the predominantly male medical practitioner, marking the decline and end of a specific collection of ideas about poison.

\textit{Shift and Decline}

From the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, these four locations broadly shared a pattern of decline in the numbers of poison cases and shifts in relationships between poison, medicine, and sorcery that had defined and shaped cases during the peak decades. These shifts included a higher frequency of accusations involving mineral poisons, such as arsenic, as well as a greater concern with ‘superstition’ than sorcery. While courts continued to police the medical practices of people of African descent, the figure of the medical practitioner as poisoner was replaced in trials by that of the enslaved domestic; at the same time, enslaved women made up an increasing proportion of the accused. The degree of dissociation of the elements in earlier poison cases, as well as the pace of decline in the frequency of trials, varied between locations.

\textsuperscript{142} ADM Série U7; ANOM Série F3, vol. 244-246.
\textsuperscript{143} Gouverneur Donzelot to Marquis de Clermont-Tonnerre, 28 September 1822; Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror,” 637; Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}, 159.
\textsuperscript{144} Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}, 31.
However, by the mid-nineteenth century the period of poison trials centered on African medical practitioners had come to an end.

Accusations of *feitiçaria* in all manifestations plummeted in Bahia after the mid-1760s, with the last report in the *cadernos* appearing in 1778. Some of this sudden drop can be attributed to institutional changes in the definition and treatment of *feitiçaria* emanating from the metropole. The third quarter of the eighteenth century involved significant reform efforts pushed by the Marques de Pombal, secretary of state from 1750 to 1777. These reforms were intended to bring the Portuguese Empire out of a perceived backwardness and into modernity, by creating a powerful central state and reducing the influence of church institutions.\(^{145}\) While not directly connected to Pombal’s efforts, the Lisbon Inquisition instituted its own contemporary reforms. *Feitiçaria* cases, particularly those involving African sorcerers, had never been a primary concern of the inquisitors in Lisbon—evident in comparing the number of accusations in the *cadernos* and how few cases from Bahia went to trial. In 1774, they made these cases even less of a priority by demoting the use of *bolsas de mandinga* and other *feitiçaria* practices to “ignorance,” their practitioners “manifest imposters.”\(^{146}\) Instances of *feitiçaria* did not cease to exist, but the Inquisition made clear their lack of interest in hearing about them; denunciations of *feitiçaria* plummeted in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

The turn of the nineteenth century was a moment of transition not only for Bahian cases making connections between poison, medicine, and sorcery, but also for the history of the colony and the institutions that prosecuted these cases. *Feitiçaria* denunciations to the Inquisition in the

\(^{145}\) For more on the political economic impact of the Pombaline Reforms in Brazil, and Bahia in particular, see Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society*, 416-428. Benjamin Breen’s work on drugs in the Portuguese and British Atlantic uncovers the pre-reform connections between the circulation of knowledge in the Portuguese tropics and the Northern European Enlightenment. For more, see Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” “Chapter 5 Occult Virtues: Anglo-Iberian Pharmaceutical Exchanges, 1650-1755.”

\(^{146}\) Cardinal da Cunha, *Regimento do Santo Ofício da Inquisição dos Reinos de Portugal* (Lisboa: Na Oficina de Miguel Manescal da Costa, 1774), 120. See also Santos, *As bolsas de mandinga no espaço Atlântico*, 15.
cadernos do promotor had largely disappeared over the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and the Lisbon Inquisition itself was disbanded in 1821.\textsuperscript{147} Few investigations by Bahia’s secular courts and limited official correspondence from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have survived; the records that have predominantly, and unsurprisingly, focused on other problems. The first thirty-five years of the nineteenth century was a period of near constant conflict and rebellion, particularly a series of slave revolts led by Africans and organized by ethnicity—poison was not a relative concern.\textsuperscript{148}

Poison cases also began to drop in Suriname after 1775. The decline was precipitous: the number of poison cases tried by the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice fell from twenty-one in 1771 to 1775 to four from 1776 to 1780, and another four from 1781 to 1785. By the early 1820s the poison trials had collapsed even further, with only two cases in the first half of the decade. In some stretches, the colony went years between poison trials.\textsuperscript{149}

In Virginia, poison trials waned slowly. Coming down from a high in the mid-eighteenth century, trials for poisoning declined to a low but steady trickle at the turn of the century. The decline began in the 1780s, when the number of poison trials across Virginia dropped from a peak of sixty-five in the decade prior to twenty-three.\textsuperscript{150} Colonial laws regarding slaves and poison remained on the books until the 1840s, and county courts of oyer and terminer continued

\begin{footnotes}
\item[147] ANTT, IL Series 30, vo. 55-131; Mott, \textit{Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade}, 11.
\item[149] NADH, RVP vol. 817-847, 897-915. There were no poison trials from 1777-1778 and 1782-1784.
\item[150] Schwarz, \textit{Twice Condemned}, 96.
\end{footnotes}
to try post-revolution cases involving slaves. In analysis of the Brunswick and Cumberland Counties—the two counties with the highest number of cases from Schwarz’ analysis—the number of cases in the first two decades of the nineteenth-century held steady with similar numbers to those from the 1780s and 90s, before dropping off completely by 1820. Part of this decline of poison trials of slaves may be attributed to the dramatic decrease in Virginia’s enslaved population in the 1830s. Demographically, Virginia’s slave population in the early nineteenth century was also vastly different from that of the 1740s when poison cases and laws had begun to emerge. While Africans made up an estimated 35% of the enslaved population in 1740, by 1800 they had become a statistically insignificant portion. However, poison cases not only decreased in number, but also as a proportion of criminal trials involving slaves. While prosecutions of slaves for poisoning did continue until 1865, accusations of arson eclipsed those of poison. The rate of conviction also dropped. In Brunswick and Cumberland counties from 1800 to 1839, the courts found only five slaves guilty out of the sixteen tried of poison.

In contrast, poison cases in Martinique declined much more sharply than elsewhere. The Cour Prévôtale did not dissolve or fade away slowly. Instead, slaveholders’ use of the tribunal for a deliberate campaign of terror against what they described as an epidemic of poison ended in late 1826 with a suppression order from the metropole. The suppression was met with protest: from the governor, who reluctantly disbanded the tribunal while predicting that poisonings

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152 LVA Brunswick and Cumberland CCOB; Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, 104.
would soon be back on the rise, to slave owners who had used and been a part of the Cour Prévôtale.\footnote{Gouverneur François Marie Michel de Bouillé to Comte de Chabrol, 9 February 1827, ANOM SG Martinique, box 52, f. 430; Procureur du Roi Riviere to Gouverneur le Comte de Chabrol, 27 July 1827, ANOM SG Martinique, box 52, f. 431; Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 67.} Subsequent poison trials from 1830 to the abolition of slavery in 1848 reveal changes in the relative importance of poison to Martinique and a shift away from ideas about poison forged and held since the 1740s. These trials were held in the new assizes courts in the towns of Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre.\footnote{Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 109.} Poison cases did not disappear, with sixty-eight people tried over thirty-five cases in these two decades. However, the relative significance of poison had diminished.\footnote{ANOM, Série F3, vol. 244-246; ANOM DPPC, Grefes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France (vol. 908-910) et Saint Pierre (vol. 918-922).} From 1830 to 1839, poison cases made up fewer than 5% of total trials of people of all stations—a drop from 18% in 1750 to 1759. Among enslaved defendants, the proportion tried for poison fell from 34% to 8% in the same decades. Once the second most common case tried before the Conseil Supérieur, second only to marronage, by the 1830s poison was nowhere near the most numerous crime, for neither the general population, nor for slaves.\footnote{For example, the conviction of Old Matt in 1816 for poisoning whites in Cumberland County specifically referred to him as a known “Conjuror.” Two cases from the properties of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and 1819 involved efforts to prosecute conjurors for poisoning other slaves, with much less success; in the first, the alleged poisoner ran away before he could be arrested, while in the second a court acquitted the accused on a lack of evidence. Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 296; Martha Jefferson Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 30 January 1800, in The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Barbara B. Oberg, vol. 31 (Princeton University Press, 2004), 347-348; Thomas Mann Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 19 April 1800, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 31, 522-524; Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, 1 July 1819, in The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series, edited by J. Jefferson Looney, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), forthcoming.}

Shifts in the relationships between poison, medicine, and sorcery accompanied the decline in poison trials. In Virginia, medical practitioners or “conjurors” did appear in several incidents as suspected poisoners, and allegations of root-based poisons made by slaves still appeared in courts.\footnote{Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 296; Martha Jefferson Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 30 January 1800, in The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, edited by Barbara B. Oberg, vol. 31 (Princeton University Press, 2004), 347-348; Thomas Mann Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 19 April 1800, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 31, 522-524; Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, 1 July 1819, in The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series, edited by J. Jefferson Looney, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), forthcoming.} However, nineteenth-century poison cases increasingly involved substances such as arsenic or opium, especially wielded by enslaved women laboring as
domestics. After 1830, women, particularly enslaved maids, were involved in a majority of cases statewide where whites were the alleged targets. The demographic composition of poison cases began to change in Martinique as well, with more enslaved women than before and a sharp decline in medical practitioners as suspects. Men still outnumbered women as 62% of the accused, even as women had become a majority of the colony’s enslaved population by 1803. Poison continued to be a crime associated with people of African descent and especially enslaved men, as they had been in the eighteenth century, with a major difference: the number of medical practitioners dropped to only three individuals, 4% of the accused. As with Virginia, part of this drop can be attributed to a shift among slave owners of ideas about who was a poisoner that had begun to emerge in the early nineteenth-century special tribunals. Slaveholder discourse focused increasingly on the idea of the “most trusted slave,” often someone in domestic work or a position of relative power, as the ideal poisoner. This changing trope appeared not only in discussions of poison, but in the listed occupations of the accused as well. Ideas about who poisoners were and how they operated that had circulated and perpetuated themselves through

162 Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 296-297.
163 État Général du recensement de l’île Martinique (1803). This ratio held steady, as women made up 52% of the enslaved population in 1835. Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 165.
164 Neither the Saint-Pierre nor Fort-de-France assize courts tried a single white person for poisoning in this period. In contrast with the Cour Prévôtale, where forty free people of color made up a modest but not insignificant 11% of the accused, only two came before the new courts for poisoning. This absence was also in contrast with the increasing share of free people of color among the population of African descent, and far below their 36% share of the total people brought to criminal court from 1830 to 1839. ANOM DPPC, Grefes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France (vol. 908-910) et Saint Pierre (vol. 918-922); ADM Série U7. In the 1789 census free gens de couleur made up 5% of the population, modestly increased to 7% by 1810. Recensement Général de la Colonie de La Martinique pour la population et la Culture pendant l’année 1789, 3 September 1789, NA-Kew War Office Papers, West Indies and South America, box 32; Recensement Général de la Population et de la Culture de l’Île de la Martinique conformément au dépouillement fait sur les Recensements particuliers de chaque paroisse pour l’année 1810, 1 July 1810, NA-Kew War Office Papers, West Indies and South America, box 47.
165 Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror,” 637. I will discuss this discursive shift in greater detail in Chapter 3.
166 Of the sixty-six slaves accused of poison from 1830 to 1848, the assizes courts provided information on the occupations of twenty-nine. In addition to the three medical practitioners, only one of whom had an official position in a plantation hospital, eleven worked in the fields while the remaining fifteen had a range of higher ranking positions, such as drivers, domestics, cooks, etc. ANOM DPPC, Grefes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France (vol. 908-910) et Saint Pierre (vol. 918-922). Sometimes these occupations were explicitly listed along with basic information about the accused, and in other cases I pulled this information from details in the testimony.
mid eighteenth-century trials had now shifted away from associations with sorcerers with combined knowledge of conjuration and poisoning.

Suriname had unusual continuity in the relative importance of medical practitioners. Although the number of poison cases in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Suriname fell dramatically, the demographics among the accused remained fairly stable. Of the ten total cases from 1776 to 1785 and 1821 to 1825, all of the accused were enslaved men, and five were described as some form of medical practitioner. Unlike Martinique and Virginia, cases involving medical practitioners did not proportionately decline before the drop in total poison cases—both collapsed in tandem.

Evidence of shifts in Bahian poison trials can be found in surviving devassas—police investigation reports—and the new imperial laws. Local judges ran these investigations and procedures for them stayed the same in the transition from the colonial to early imperial period. As other historians working with these records have cautioned, their uneven preservation and the lack of data on the proportion of how many of the total cases survived makes these records more like suggestive snapshots than useful measures of change over time. The town of Cachoeira—a port on the interior of the bay—has the highest concentration of surviving reports. Of the eighty-two usable reports from 1820 to 1839, four involved poison; three of these cases involved slaves committing suicide by ingesting arsenic. Suicide via arsenic was both very specific and

167 NADH, RVP vol. 817-847, 897-915.
168 I’d like to thank Urano Andrade for pointing me in the direction of the collection of devassas at the APEB.
170 Unfortunately, most of the devassas from the eighteenth century have not survived or have reached a state of disintegration that makes them unavailable to researchers.
171 Devassa da Morte do Vicente, 7 January 1824, APEB Series Judiciário, box 933, f. 10; Devassa da Morte do João, 14 October 1826, APEB Series Judiciário, box 933, f. 16; Devassa da Morte do Manoel, 5 August 1829, APEB Series Judiciário, box 808, f. 11. The fourth case involved a white man who died after drinking a remedy from the apothecary—an autopsy discovered that it was corrosive sublimate of mercury. No one was arrested and
disconnected from eighteenth-century cases involving enslaved medical practitioners and illnesses caused by poison as malevolent feitiços placed in the victim’s body. Legal links between poison, medicine, sorcery, and people of African descent were also absent in the new imperial Criminal Code of 1830. In fact, the only mention of poison in the entire code was as part of a list of aggravating circumstances for crime; the only mention of medical practice was in a section forbidding abortions. Feitiçaria, magic, or even “superstition” were completely absent. This law code and the investigations from Cachoeira suggest that poison/feitiçaria was no longer a major criminal concern in Bahia.

Subtle differences between a Virginian 1843 act on poison and that of 1748 indicate changes as well in the relationship that the laws described between poison, slaves, and medical practice. The ability of enslaved practitioners to use their healing as a cover for the nefarious administration of poisons had been the primary justification for making such medical practice illegal in 1748; the 1843 law made no suggestion of such cover. In 1748, medicines could be “poisonous” and their preparation, distribution or use a capital offense without indications of harm or ill-intent; the 1843 law made a split between the felony of administering “noxious and destructive” medicines or poisons “with intent thereby to murder,” and the demoted misdemeanor charge of practicing medicine without an owner’s consent. Interestingly, the 1843 law added a new element under the heading of “poison”: abortions caused by “any drug or

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the investigation appears to have concluded that it was an accident, as the apothecary had a good reputation. See Devassa da Morte de Pedro Martins Milagres, 8 March 1831, APEB Series Judiciário, box 450, f. 2.

172 These cases did fit in with Jackson André da Silva Ferreira’s study of suicide from 1850 to 1888, where poison was the most common method used in suicides. Interestingly, suicide by poison was most common among the free population, with a lesser but still significant proportion of suicides by slaves; among slaves, this form of suicide was much more common among creoles than African-born slaves. Jackson André da Silva Ferreira, Loucos e pecadores: suicídio na Bahia do século XIX (Salvador: Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2004), 78-85.

substance.” Virginian courts—and, by extension, the slave owners who ran them—continued to be concerned with unsanctioned medical practice by people of African descent, but no longer inherently associated these practices with poison.

Shortly after the suppression of the Cour Prévôtale, changes in the criminal laws of Martinique regarding slaves also began to break down the connections between poison, medicine, and sorcery that had held sway among whites for the better part of the last century. By a royal ordinance in September 1828, France applied the 1810 Napoleonic Code Pénal to her remaining Caribbean colonies, a code that mentioned poison only as an example of voluntary homicide, and punished “superstitious” practices, such as divination, with the relatively light punishment of a fine and a few days in jail. In 1831, the Martinique council assembled a project for how to apply the new laws to slaves. This report maintained traces of white lawmakers’ specific concerns about poison: specifically, how to root out societies of slaves organized with the express purpose of poisoning people and livestock. The code even added a new element, by classifying the killing of one’s owner by any means, including poison, as parricide. However, the 1831 code did mark a significant shift in the prosecution of poison cases, as it separated slaves’ practice of sorcery and medicine from poison. Slaves guilty of “spells, enchantments, or other superstitious practices,” including grave robbing to make maléfices, were condemned to work in chain gangs. For practicing medicine or preparing remedies of any kind, the code likewise sentenced slaves to convict labor; those who sold, distributed, or possessed “false beverages” with “dangerous ingredients,” including compositions made for “superstitious purposes,” were sentenced to a whipping and time in the public stocks. Not even the possession or sale of “substances to kill,” as long as they were not used, would result in the gruesome capital

175 Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 27.
punishments from less than a decade earlier. The overlap between sorcery, medicine, and poison could now only legally occur with “attempts on the life” of a person or “useful” animal with a “substance that can give death”—only slaves accusing of using a ‘real’ poison with malicious intent could be tried as a poisoner. Practices that were once enough to convict and sometimes execute enslaved people in the eighteenth century, such as composing and distributing *maléfices*, were no longer capital crimes.

The decline of poison cases and changes to the relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery unfolded in a unique context in the former Dutch colonies of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo, which the British took during the Napoleonic wars and formed into British Guiana. The British maintained the old Dutch legal apparatus, with alterations designed to implement the new policy of “amelioration” of conditions for the enslaved. Increased scrutiny of plantation practices, along with an expansion of the responsibilities of the office of the Fiscal to assess both complaints by and against slaves, produced a wealth of documentation. Both the statistical summaries and detailed investigative reports reveal a shift in the treatment and position of poison cases in this new colony.

A major part of this shift can be attributed to the separation of poison and *obeah* into separate legal categories. During the Dutch period, courts primarily tried and discussed practices as *vergift* (poison) that would have been considered *obeah* by courts in the British Caribbean. Over the course of the nineteenth century, there was a significant shift in the British Caribbean in colonial officials’ discourse surrounding *obeah* and its prosecution. With the 1830s

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178 *Obeah* is a notoriously difficult term to define. Instead, historians of *obeah* and the British Caribbean have turned away from attempting to nail down a concrete definition and towards exploring the development and interactions between the term’s many meanings. See Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, “Chapter 1 Divining and Defining Obeah”; Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah*, 2-3.
and emancipation as a key turning point, from a legal perspective *obeah* shifted from a crime of causing physical harm and/or inciting rebellion to a crime of fraud, preying on superstition.\(^{179}\)

The decoupling of poison and *obeah* was a significant element in this shift. While *obeah* laws from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had affirmed the association between poison and *obeah*, after emancipation all references to poison disappeared.\(^{180}\)

In early nineteenth-century criminal records for British Guiana, “poison” was no longer a great concern—in fact, it barely registered as a concern at all. In the Fiscal’s Reports for Demerara and Essequibo from January 1828 to June 1834, there were only three cases of attempted poisonings and twenty-eight cases of *obeah*.\(^{181}\) Looking more closely at a single year highlights how small these figures were in context: of the 20,260 recorded offences committed by slaves in 1828, there was a single case of an attempted poisoning—in this same report, there were only five cases of *obeah*.\(^{182}\) The near absence of poison cases is a notable difference from high numbers of cases in the Dutch Guianas in the mid-eighteenth century. In a summary record of the 173 proceedings against slaves in Berbice from July 1831 to February 1832, there was not a single case of poisoning or *obeah*.\(^{183}\) Furthermore, in the complaints to the Berbice Fiscal’s office from 1819 to 1827, none were made against a slave specifically for poisoning. This


\(^{181}\)NA-Kew, CO 116/156-163 Demerara and Essequibo Reports of Protectors.

\(^{182}\)It is possible to overstate the implications of this absence, as numbers alone do not necessarily prove a lack of concern; the fact that only eight slaves were tried for murder in 1828 does not mean that murder was no longer a considered a serious crime. NA-Kew, CO 116/156. Most crimes in this accounting were dwarfed by accusations in the category of work related offences (neglect, refusal to work, idleness, etc.), which accounted for 64% of all cases. The next most common categories were disobedience (8%), insubordination—including striking an overseer, defiance, and insolence—(7%), running away and theft (each 5%).

\(^{183}\)NA-Kew, CO 116/142. Most of these cases were of running away (42%) followed by work related offences (23%).
absence is impressive, considering that from 1770 to 1775, poison accounted for four out of the ten trials involving slaves in the Berbice Court of Policy and Criminal Justice.  

However, poisoning did appear within several obeah cases in British Guiana. Testimony in these cases reveals how the term “poison” continued to be used on plantations as a framework for discussing illnesses, even if it was now incidental to the criminal trial. For example, in the 1819 case of the medical practitioner Hans, slaves on a nearby plantation hired him to identify individuals responsible for causing illnesses and deaths with poison. The primary concern of the court was not the suspected poisonings, but the fact that the black drivers had secretly organized a dangerous and illegal divination ritual that resulted in injuries and intimidation of the suspected culprit. Neither was poison a focal concern for complaints by and against slaves to the office of the Fiscal—when accusations did appear, they were tangential to the primary investigation and largely ignored. While the glimpses of medical interactions in these reports show that conflicts over illnesses and ways of dealing with them on plantations had not disappeared, the prominence of poison was gone.

Likewise in Bahia, investigations and trials of medical practitioners of African descent did not cease; instead, they shifted form. An important 1785 investigation of self-identifying Jeje freedmen and slaves (Jeje being a Brazilian ethnic term for people born in the Gbe-speaking area of the Bight of Benin) at a Cachoeira calundú suggests that some interest in prosecuting feitiçaria continued in local courts, even as the presence of the Inquisition in Bahia faded. The

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185 Complaint against the negro Hans, 17 Jun 1819, NA-Kew, CO 116/138, p. 60-63. See also Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah,” 462-475. In this article, Browne conducts a detailed and comparative analysis of the case of Hans, a similar case of a medical practitioner named Willem in 1823, and the role of violence in obeah practices for both.
186 See, for example: Examination of a complaint preferred by the negro woman Jenny, against her mistress, the coloured woman Elizabeth Ann Sanders alias Elizabeth Atkinson, 1 Aug 1821, NA-Kew CO 116/138, p. 86-87; Complaint of the Negress Jenny against E. A. Sanders, 11 Aug 1821, NA-Kew CO 116/139, p. 786-971.
content of the case also indicates the beginning of new forms of organized worship.\(^\text{187}\) Unlike the calundús denounced earlier in the eighteenth century—which primarily focused on services rendered through divination and both preventative and therapeutic treatments of illnesses—the confiscated leaves and objects in the Jeje Cachoeira calundú were suggestive of a shrine, offerings, and congregational worship.\(^\text{188}\)

The 1785 case was part of a transition, both in the institutionalization of healing cults with increasingly complex ritual practices among Bahians of African descent and in government efforts to repress these practices. Early nineteenth-century raids of terreiros—healing houses—had more to do with police fears of rebellion than complaints of causing harm. In the first recorded use of the term “Candomblé,” a raid in 1807 near Santo Amaro, the accusation centered not on healing or causing harm through poisons or feitiços, but of assisting runaways and holding gunpowder and arms.\(^\text{189}\) The police saw Candomblé practitioners and their terreiros as a threat

\(^{187}\) Responding to a denunciation, police raided a gathering of six people who all claimed to be Jeje—a Brazilian term for people born in the Gbe-speaking area of the Bight of Benin. Their leader, Sebastião de Guerra, had already once been accused of feitiçaria and now was publicly known for curing feitiços, dancing calundús, and leading worship in the Jeje language. Reis, “Magia Jeje na Bahia,” 78.

\(^{188}\) Police confiscated and described objects in the house, including little calabashes with ingredients for maléficos, buried objects, and an arrangement of leaves. This last detail was particularly significant, as leaves were crucial in worship of the vodun, initiation rituals, and medicinal baths in the Bight of Benin. Reis, “Magia Jeje na Bahia,” 67-79; Parés, The Formation of Candomblé, 82-83. For more on the use of leaves in particular in modern Bahian Candomblé, see Voeks, Sacred Leaves of Candomblé. Anthropologist Luis Nicolau Parés argues that the emergence of alters like this one in the late eighteenth century, influenced and made possible by a large wave of Gbe-speakers from the Bight of Benin to Bahia, was a crucial development in the increasing complexity and organization of Candomblé as an emergent religious institution in the early nineteenth century. Parés, The Formation of Candomblé, 78-85. See the entirety of “Chapter 3 From Calundu to Candomblé: The Formative Process of Afro-Brazilian Religion” and “Chapter 4 The Jeje Contribution to the Institutionalization of Candomblé in the Nineteenth Century.”

not as a den of poisoners, but as a place for potentially rebellious gatherings of people of African
descent. This trend continued in the early nineteenth century slave revolts, as some participants
wore bolsas de mandinga as protective amulets for battle.\textsuperscript{190} Police began to identify any
African-associated object as a potential threat—but not necessarily connected to poison.\textsuperscript{191}
Keeping in mind the relative scarcity of documentation of medical practices and practitioners of
African descent in the first half of the nineteenth century, poison accusations had temporarily
disappeared. The police investigations into poison that did appear in these decades, as mentioned
above, were completely divorced from their raids of Candomblé houses that were increasingly
institutionalized with specific rituals, initiations, and spiritual affiliations.\textsuperscript{192}

An interesting resurgence of poison accusations in the mid-nineteenth century became an
avenue for policing Candomblé practitioners. In the 1850s and 60s, police received repeated calls
for greater crackdowns on the popular and burgeoning Candomblé houses. These calls framed
their activities as superstitions, dangerous not for their efficacy but for their perceived
backwardness in holding Brazil back from modernity.\textsuperscript{193} A chief source of fear was of the

\textsuperscript{190} The use of amulets for this purpose had also been prominent in eighteenth-century revolts, such as Tackey’s
Revolt in 1760 Jamaica and the war on the Cottica river described by John Gabriel Stedman in 1796. See Burnard
Stedman, \textit{Narrative of a five year’s expedition (1796)}, vol. 2, p. 107, 347.
\textsuperscript{191} Reis, \textit{Slave Rebellion in Brazil}, 203. See all of “Chapter 11 The Repression after the Uprising.”
\textsuperscript{192} Parés, \textit{The Formation of Candomblé}, 91-93; Historians and anthropologists who study \textit{Candomblé} make clear
that these affiliations, Nagô, Jeje, Angola, etc., that continue in \textit{Candomblé} houses today, were spiritual and not
necessarily determined by the ethnic background of participants, who were multi-ethnic. See Parés, \textit{The Formation
of Candomblé}, 68-69; João José Reis, “Candomblé in Nineteenth-Century Bahia: Priests, Followers, Clients,” in
Kristen Mann and Edna G. Bay, eds., \textit{Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the
Bight of Benin and Brazil} (Portland, OR: F. Cass, 2001), 132. This is also the case for Richard Price on the ritual
practices among the Saramaka maroons and Stephen Palmié on Cuban Santería. See Price, \textit{Alabi’s World}, 308-309;
Palmie, \textit{Wizards & Scientists}, 159-160, 196-197. The kinds of client-based divinatory medical practices that existed
in the eighteenth-century coexisted with newer Candomblé ceremonies centered around the worship of particular
gods—often times with the same individual acting as an authority in the terreiro and the medical practitioner. Parés,
\textit{The Formation of Candomblé}, 84.
\textsuperscript{193} Calls for crackdowns were particularly vehement in the Catholic Press. For a five-part series on \textit{feitiçaria} in
Bahia, see: Padre Mariano de Santa Roza de Lima, “A Feiticeria entre nós: ella não pode ser extirpada senão pela
also discusses this series in Reis, \textit{Divining Slavery and Freedom}, 168-169. The Catholic press was not alone: other
number of “civilized” people attending and even joining Candomblé congregations to solve their problems.\textsuperscript{194} However, under the laws of the empire, superstition was not a crime.\textsuperscript{195} Police instead justified their raids on terreiros as following noise complaints, or claims that Candomblé leaders had received stolen goods as payment for various services.\textsuperscript{196}

Poison accusations became a way to remove religious leaders as potential threats. The connection to poisoning centered on ‘taming’ services provided by Candomblé leaders—most of whom were free and African-born—to slaves to alter their owners’ behavior and obtain freedom.\textsuperscript{197} While there were many accusations of such “poisonings” in the second half of the nineteenth century, the police rarely had enough evidence to being a case to trial. At the height of a zealous campaign of repression in the 1860s, deportation became a favored method for slaveholders and police to maneuver around legal requirements when charges could not be proven.\textsuperscript{198} In the second half of the nineteenth century, accusations of poisoning and feitiçaria also sometimes came from within Candomblé houses. These kinds of accusations were especially prevalent in times of succession disputes and divisions between the leadership of Candomblé communities.\textsuperscript{199} The connections between poison, medicine, sorcery, and practitioners of African descent had shifted, as poison accusations became part of a larger web of internal and external policing within the institutional houses of Candomblé.

\textsuperscript{194} Reis, \textit{Divining Slavery and Freedom}, 6, 166-167.
\textsuperscript{195} Reis, \textit{Divining Slavery and Freedom}, 127.
\textsuperscript{196} Reis, \textit{Divining Slavery and Freedom}, 129-130. For an example of a raid for ‘disturbing the peace,’ see João Joaquim da Silva to Francisco José de Sousa Soares d’Andrea, 28 December 1846, APEB Series Colônia e Província, Polícia assuntos diversos, box 3114, f. 7.
\textsuperscript{197} Reis, \textit{Divining Slavery and Freedom} 129-132, 142; Reis, “Candomblé in Nineteenth-Century Bahia,” 120.
\textsuperscript{198} Reis, \textit{Divining Slavery and Freedom}, 135-139, 159-161.
\textsuperscript{199} Parés, \textit{The Formation of Candomblé}, 78; for more analysis on these internal accusations and the complicate role of terreiros as sites of both spiritual aggression and intimacy, see Geschire, \textit{Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust}, “Chapter 5 Candomblé de Bahia—Between Witchcraft and Religion.”
Despite their differences, Bahia, the Dutch Guianas, Virginia, and Martinique were part of a shared history of poison in the western Atlantic. The narrative arc of poison cases in these colonies began not with existing legislation, which did not at first specifically associate poison with medicine, sorcery, and people of African descent, but with early poison cases. These first trials and poison events on plantations coincided with a rapid expansion of the number of Africans arriving in each colony and shaped new laws and ordinances. By easing prosecution of suspected poisoners and spreading ideas that became common knowledge about them, these laws encouraged an acceleration of trials and a feedback loop reinforcing the connection between poison, medicine, and sorcery. Convergences in the content and demographics of the accused across these four locations remained remarkably stable until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. After this point, and somewhat later for Martinique, the number of poison cases declined and their content shifted. Accusations of poisoning, increasingly linked to mineral poisons, diverged from those of ‘superstition,’ while fears of domestic poisoners among slaveholders replaced that of the medical practitioner of African descent. With variations on the exact timing, by the mid-nineteenth century the specific relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery that drove eighteenth-century poison cases had unraveled.

Within the history of poison cases, I track the rise and fall of a specific driving idea: of sorcerous afflictions and cures connected to people of African descent, and especially medical practitioners. Poison trials continued to exist in the second half of the nineteenth century, as did those of medical practitioners for “superstitions.” However, their practices and “poison” had shifted and were no longer consistently linked. The specific relationship between poison, sorcery, and African medical practitioners that had emerged over the early eighteenth century had some to an end.
Medical practitioners of African descent are the key to understanding poison in the western Atlantic; even though they were only involved in about a third of total poison cases, their activities (and colonial officials’ concern about their activities) shaped poison legislation and central ideas on the relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery. Legislation on poison cases and familiarity through public knowledge of investigations and trials helped expand and perpetuate poison accusations, but these laws were reactions to existing accusations and practices on plantations. Medical practitioners as both healers and inflictors of poison, with their ambivalent relationships with other slaves and slaveholders who both valued and feared their services, were crucial to the development and justification of colonial poison legislation.

Bringing together data from multiple locations over a long time span made it possible to see shared patterns and the narrative arc of the legal relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery created by white slaveholders and colonial officials. However, a greater understanding of ideas about poison requires a closer lens. Poison events were sites of contested ideas about causes of and solutions to illness; each case brought together people with vastly different perspectives and interpretations of these events. The remainder of this dissertation will focus on these perspectives in individual cases.
On January 30, 1800, Martha Jefferson Randolph wrote to her father, Thomas Jefferson, about the mysterious death of Jupiter, Jefferson’s fifty-six year old enslaved coachman. Jupiter regularly drove Jefferson the sixty-five miles to Fredericksburg, where Jefferson caught the coach to Philadelphia. That January, Jefferson paid for Jupiter to stay overnight at an inn in Fredericksburg, as he had been ill. Martha Jefferson Randolph described in her letter what happened upon Jupiter’s return:

…to your enquiries relative to poor Jupiter he too has paid the debt to nature; finding himself no better at his return home, he unfortunately conceived him self poisoned & went to consult the negro doctor who attended the George’s. he went in the house to see uncle Randolph [Randolph Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson’s brother] who gave him a dram which he drank & seemed to be as well as he had been for some time past; after which he took a dose from this black doctor who pronounced that it would kill or cure. 2 ½ hours after taking the medecine [sic] he fell down in a strong convulsion fit which lasted from ten to elevin [sic] hours, during which time it took 3 stout men to hold him, he languished nine days but was never heard to speak from the first of his being seized to the moment of his death.\(^1\)

In this same letter she gave news on the state of Ursula Granger, the enslaved head cook at Monticello. Ursula had also gone to see the “black doctor” who had come to Monticello months earlier to treat Ursula’s late husband, George (the overseer), and son George Jr. (the smith). According to her, “Ursala [sic] is I fear going in the same manner with her husband & son, a constant puking shortness of breath and swelling first in the legs but now extending itself the doctor I understand had also given her means as they term it and upon Jupiter’s death has absconded. I should think his murders sufficiently manifest to come under the cognizance of the


law.”3 By April, Ursula was dead. In a letter to his father-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph ascribed all four deaths to the “poisons of the Buckingham Negroe conjuror.”4

While it did not result in a trial, the case at Monticello offers a window into slaveholders’ interpretations of poisoning events. Slaveholders and colonial officials created laws to govern “poisoning” practices—as explored in the previous chapter—but how did they perceive and understand individual poisoning events? Though varied, their responses to these events shared a core concern with establishing power over the situation. Slaveholders—as plantation owners, judges, legislators, physicians, and clergy—experienced poisoning as a profound and frightening usurpation of control, and, perhaps more alarmingly, a shattering of illusions over the completeness of their control over free and enslaved people of African descent. Their responses to poisoning cases were numerous: establishing new laws and ordinances to police the activities of black medical practitioners; conducting their own investigations and punishments on plantations; or inserting themselves into the ritual activities of these practitioners. Identifying and writing about poison was also a way of making poison knowable and in doing so asserting a form of intellectual control. While the language and contours of slaveholder discourse on poisoning changed from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the central problem of control was a constant. In the stark power divisions of slave societies in the western Atlantic, owners also had power over legal definitions and over trials, wielding enormous influence over which cases came to trial, how they were tried, and their outcome. Understanding the perspective of slave owners—though incomplete, as there was much about these poisoning cases outside of their understanding—is therefore a crucial component of understanding the phenomenon of these waves of trials.

Scholars of slavery in the western Atlantic have contributed a rich body of work on perspective of slaveholders, especially on their relationship with the law. Owners’ ability to shape the law to fit their interests was a key component in the formation of slave societies, while tensions between slave owners and government representatives from metropoles over the jurisdiction over the lives of the enslaved was a significant counterpoint. Historians have also examined the complex relationship between slaveholders and medical practitioners of African descent—free and enslaved—that they both depended upon and feared; the same medical practitioners who were so frequently accused in poisoning cases. Taking this important scholarship as a starting point, in this chapter I explore more deeply the specific ways slaveholders acted and reacted around poisoning cases as a way to achieve insight into both their understandings of poison, medicine, and sorcery, and their relationships with the slaves and black practitioners these cases so often involved.

This chapter focuses on the ideas of slaveholders, particularly those who lived in the western Atlantic (rather than absentee owners in Europe). Many of these owners were born in the Americas, and often claimed that their knowledge of African poisoning stemmed from their own personal experience. Ironically, some of the best and clearest sources of slaveholders’ ideas come from the reporting of traveling European observers who themselves may not have owned slaves. Some of these observers primarily repeated anecdotes told to them by slave owners, while others tried to analyze slave owners themselves. With the high circulation of soldiers, priests,

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and merchants in the Atlantic world, the lines between outside observers and participants in slave societies were porous. For example, while French Dominican Jean Baptiste Labat only spent a fraction of his adult life in as a missionary in Martinique, his position at the Saint Jacques monastery and sugar plantation put him in intimate proximity with slaves and local slave owners. By his account, he himself was deeply involved in efforts to repress and punish African “sorcerers.” In addition to observation and overt claims to knowledge created for publication, a significant portion of the evidence form this chapter comes from the ways that slave owners and overseers—who often had much more direct knowledge of enslaved people on plantations—testified about poisoning in the context of trials. Trial records, personal and official correspondence, and published works reveal how slaveholders constructed their discourses of poison.

Many slaveholders in the western Atlantic were not only owners of plantations, but also lawmakers and judges. Some of the eighteenth-century laws and ordinances regarding poison had a direct connection to legislators involved in poisoning cases. For example, the first extraordinary commission on poisoning passed in Martinique in 1753, which loosened rules of evidence and boosted the number of poison cases in the colony, began when one of the members of the Council personally accused a slave of poisoning. Slave owners not only made laws about poison, but adjudicated them in poison trials. In Suriname, the thirteen men who served for life on the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice were always prominent slaveholders appointed by the governor. Slaveholders had prominent roles in deciding poison cases in Virginia as well. As Virginia became a slave society, colonial law evolved to support the local needs of owners by

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7 Jan Baptiste Labat, Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amerique, contenant l'histoire naturelle de ces pays (Paris: Chez Guillaume Cavalier, 1722), vol. 1, 495-499. See the entirety of Chapitre 21 Histoires de quelques Negres Sorciers.
8 Maxim de Bompar and Charles Marin Hurson to Antoine Louis Rouillé, 16 June 1753, ANOM Séries C8a, box 60, f. 7.
reinforcing plantation power structures. In the eighteenth century, the interests of wealthy slave owners shaped the formation and application of slave laws as they both dominated the legislature and served as appointed commissioners in the county courts to try slave crimes and pass sentences. County courts were sites of affirmation for slave owners’ social standing and power and a rotating cast of Virginia gentry tried slave poison cases in the second half of the eighteenth century.\(^\text{10}\) For example, in Cumberland county slaveholder George Carrington was a judge in the respective trials of Isaac and Quash (1759), Peter and Mingo (1763), and Frank and Dick (1769); the owner of the enslaved woman Dido, who was hanged for preparing and attempting to administer “poisonous medicines” in 1756; and one of the plaintiffs in the 1773 case against Caesar, accused of preparing and exhibiting a “poisonous medicine” to one of his slaves, a woman named Jenny.\(^\text{11}\) Powerful slaveholders like Carrington appeared again and again in these courts in multiple roles.

The overlap between their roles as slaveholders and judges also encouraged owners in official positions to bend the laws on jurisdiction and punishments. As an inquisitorial commissioner in Bahia, Manoel Anselmo de Almada did not have the authority to make arrests without orders from the Lisbon office.\(^\text{12}\) However, Anselmo was also a slaveholder, born and living in the city of Salvador, and owner of a tobacco plantation in São Felipe parish in the Recôncavo. His status was not uncommon; many of the Bahian ecclesiastics were locals, and João Calmon, one of the longest serving commissioners from 1701 to 1737, came from a


\(^{12}\) Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 149. For more on how the Lisbon Inquisition operated in Bahia, see Mott, *Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade*. 

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powerful Bahian family with a sugar plantation. Anselmo appended a letter explaining his unorthodox actions to a 1778 case file denouncing free black medical practitioners and alleged feiticeiros Thereza and Luis. While visiting his plantation away from the Salvador office, Anselmo claimed that his slaves and the people of the parish continuously came to him clamoring for action against this “preta Mina” Thereza, who had a bad reputation as a feiticeira and who had allegedly killed entire families with “infirmities unknown to the Art of Medicine.” So moved by these accusations, and not wanting her to escape justice, Anselmo took the initiative to capture and arrest Thereza and conduct an investigation without waiting for the authority to do so. He expressed confidence that there was sufficient proof from the testimonies he gathered for her trial, an opinion that was not shared by the inquisitors in Lisbon when they received his case file. Though the Lisbon office declined to take the case, it is illustrative of the ways slave owners as judges often had personal stakes in the investigation of poison and sorcery trials and acted accordingly.

However, the marriage between slaveholder interests, laws, and courts was not always smooth. As Natalie Zemon Davis has noted, colonial Suriname was held in tension between multiple simultaneous systems of justice: that of slaveholders on their plantations, the local colonial government, imperial governance, and that of enslaved communities. A similar tension existed in Martinique. In his letter informing the Ministère de la Marine of the Conseil Supérieur’s 1753 decision to suspend portions of French law in establishing the extraordinary

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13 Mott, Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade, 44, 49-50, 52. For more on Calmon, see the entirety of “Chapter 3 O Cônego João Calmon, Comissário do Santo Oficio na Bahia Setecentista.”
14 Denúncia de Thereza e Luis, 17 January 1778, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 129, p. 490-494. Anselmo also attempted to arrest Luis, who witnesses identified as Thereza’s lover, but Luis managed to run away.
15 Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 971.
commission for poisoning cases, Governor Maxim de Bompar expressed concern that, however valid their alarm at poisoning and their desire to maintain order, it would be dangerous for the colonial slaveholders on the council to think that they had the right to act unilaterally.\textsuperscript{17} Bompar’s unease was part of a jurisdictional tension that was a continuity in poisoning cases. Some slave owners and overseers chose to take matters into their own hands—torturing and executing suspected poisoners on their plantations—rather than work within the court system. In 1743, the same year as Bahia’s ordinance on poison, the royal secretary of the judgment of crimes in Bahia reported numerous slave owners in the city, Recôncavo, and sertão practicing extrajudicial punishments of their slaves for crimes.\textsuperscript{18} The situation was similar in Suriname, leading to one high profile case of a white manager for torturing and beheading an enslaved woman he had accused of poisoning.\textsuperscript{19} By choosing to interrogate, torture, or even execute suspected poisoners on their own, slaveholders and managers became a challenge to the legal judicial system and authority of the colonial government.\textsuperscript{20} In Martinique, efforts to address poisonings by and of slaves highlighted tensions and compromises of judicial power between slaveholders and colonial officials. In the earliest cases, Governor Vaucresson was as alarmed by slaveholders’ usurpation of legal violence in extracting confessions from suspected slaves as he was by the economic threat of poison. While the Code Noir set explicit limitations on owners’ rights to violence towards their slaves, Vaucresson deemed it necessary to remind them of their limits in a 1713 ordinance in the wake of these cases.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{17} Maxim de Bompar and Charles Marin Hurson to Antoine Louis Rouillé, 16 June 1753.
\textsuperscript{18} André de Melo e Castro to D. João V, 30 September 1743, AHU, Administração Central Bahia, box 78, f. 6444.
\textsuperscript{19} Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 967-968; Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”, 244-247.
\textsuperscript{20} Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 971.
\textsuperscript{21} Le Code Noir ou Edit du Roy, 1685; Nicolas François Arnoul de Vaucresson to Comte de Pontchartrain, 20 May 1713, ANOM Série C8a, box 19, f. 341.
\end{footnotesize}
confessions on plantations that conformed to their expectations. Case records from eighteenth-century Suriname are rife with such practices. In 1735, an enslaved man named Kees told the court that when the overseer suspected him of poisoning his water—due to a bad smell—his owner Jon Kramer tied him to a plank, beat him, and refused him food and water until he confessed and named accomplices. Kees renounced his confession to the court. Similarly, in the 1742 case of Sambo, his owner and a group of neighboring owners interrogated him harshly on the plantation until he confessed to being a poisoner. Similar gangs of neighborhood slaveholders conducted interrogations of Jean Baptiste in 1766 and Jacques in 1767 in Martinique. Slaveholders’ arresting, interrogating, and torturing slaves they suspected of poisoning to extract a confession in 1770s Martinique was apparently both commonplace and accepted, however begrudgingly, by the Conseil Supérieur. The degree to which these actions outside the courtroom affected the outcome of cases varied; during peak periods of poison accusations their questionable legality appeared to have mattered little if at all. While the court found Kees’ claims to have been forced to confess under abuse troubling enough to result in an ambiguous outcome, the same court seven years later had no problem condemning Sambo to be branded, pinched with hot tongs, and beheaded. In fact, when Sambo attempted to deny his earlier confession from the plantation, the court ordered him to be tortured at Fort Zelandia until he affirmed his confession. Likewise, while the Trinité court mildly chastised Seigneur Lahoussaye Du Cipre for overstepping his bounds in interrogating and extracting a confession.

26 From his file, it appears the Kees was not punished by the court, but his fate is unclear.
27 Proces van Kees, 47-48v; Proces van Sambo, n.p.
from Jacques on his own, they nevertheless accepted the accusation as valid and proceeded to find Jacques guilty; the Conseil Supérieur confirmed their verdict on automatic appeal.\(^{28}\)

Furthermore, in relatively rare instances when courts found slaves not guilty, or determined that they had insufficient evidence to convict, slaveholders continued to pursue the matter on their own plantations. Slaves found not guilty in Virginia, Suriname, and Martinique were almost always discharged back to their owners, often the same people who had brought the case to trial. While colonial prefect Pierre-Clément de Laussat was greatly concerned with the threat of poisoning in Martinique and recorded his observations of a wave of cases in 1807 and 1808 in his diary, he was deeply troubled when he discovered that the Dominicans at Saint-Jacques plantation—one of the largest in the colony—had established their own jail and had locked up slaves who had been implicated but released in the recent Basse Pointe case. The conditions in these cells were so “horrible” as to upset Laussat greatly, but apparently were not bad enough in his view to justify exposing them.\(^{29}\) The courts themselves sometimes worked with slaveholders to deal with slaves they did not convict. In a rare detail from one of the Virginia cases, the Caroline County court sentenced Tom to deportation in 1744 as a potential threat, even though the court had determined that he was guilty only of giving out medicinal powders but not of killing a fellow slave—this case came four years before the Virginia legislature outlawed such activity.\(^{30}\) Laussat also reported slave owners quietly working with the Saint Pierre jail to deport slaves they arrested for poisoning without a trial.\(^{31}\)

When discussing poisoning events, slaveholders frequently framed alleged poisonings as

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\(^{28}\) Procès de Jacques, 410-411. This case, like all capital cases in Martinique, had an automatic appeal to the Conseil Supérieur. While the original files from Trinité have not survived, the summary from the Conseil Supérieur contains notes from the first trial.

\(^{29}\) Pierre-Clément de Laussat, Mémoires, 18 February 1808, ADM Série J-24, p. 94, 97-98.


\(^{31}\) Pierre-Clément de Laussat, Mémoires, 18 February 1808, p. 100.
being about them, even when they were not the targets of affliction. Enslaved people were property, and the death or illness of a slave caused by poisoning could damage a slaveholder’s economic prospects. However, what is interesting is owners’ claim that hurting slaveholders was the primary goal of slaves who allegedly poisoned other slaves—in other words, that the only relevant relationship involved was that between a slaveholder and slave, and not those between slaves. Martinican slave owners were particularly vocal with this theory. The Conseil Supérieur included an unusual essay with a poisoning case in 1756 putting forward a theory on what enslaved poisoners did and why for the benefit of the Ministère de la Marine. The court was particularly concerned with slaves who, through resentment, attempted to cause their owners’ financial ruin by killing their slaves and livestock, and warned the metropole that “there are only too many examples of these accidents equally strange and deplorable.”

The court expressed similar opinions in cases from 1757 and 1773 on slaves bent on “ruining” their owners, their direct and indirect attacks based on “the natural hatred of the slave towards his master.” Slave owners in British North American colonies also discussed poisoning cases with enslaved targets as ultimately crimes against them. The wording of the 1748 law on medical practice by slaves made clear that the issue in question was whether such practices were sanctioned by slave owners or not; a slave medically treating another slave outside the purview of slaveholder permission was “poisonous” because it subverted a slaveholder’s authority, not because it caused harm. Harm and intent were relevant for sentencing, but not for defining the crime. While outside of Virginia, the anecdotes Pennsylvania slaveholders shared with Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm in his 1748 travels offer suggestive insight into how nearby owners in the

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34 Hening, Statutes at Large, vol. 4, 105.
Chesapeake may have interpreted poisoning events with enslaved targets. Kalm shared with his readers several stories of communities of slaves poisoning enslaved individuals, framed as a way to indirectly hurt slaveholders they did not dare directly poison by means of killing their favorite and most beloved slaves.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, Kalm’s informants discussed poisoning between enslaved people as proxies for conflict between slaves and slave owners.

Interestingly, the idea of harming slaveholders by poisoning livestock was far more prevalent in Martinique than elsewhere, and was an enduring part of Martinique’s waves of poisoning accusations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Concern about slaves poisoning livestock appeared from the earliest cases from 1712 to the last slave poisoning cases in the 1840s; while livestock were cited as targets in only ten (8\%) of the Suriname cases and none from Bahia or Virginia from 1680 to 1850, they appeared in a whopping forty-eight cases (41\%) from Martinique. However, livestock were rarely the exclusive targets: in 32 of these cases slaves were accused of poisoning other slaves in addition to livestock.\textsuperscript{36} In any case, Martinican slaveholders discussed the losses of both livestock and enslaved people as damaged caused to themselves.\textsuperscript{37}

While slaveholders’ perspective on poisoning may have been self-referential to an unwarranted degree, a significant number of cases in the western Atlantic did involve owners as alleged targets. The literature on poisoning has largely focused on these cases and framed them

\textsuperscript{35} Kalm, \textit{Travels into North America}, 397-400.
\textsuperscript{36} ANTT IL Series 28 and Series 30, vol. 55-131; NADH RVP vol. 783-915; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, Table 10 p. 96; LVA Brunswick CCOB vol. 1-36; LVA Cumberland CCOB vol. 1749-51 to 1844-51; ANOM Série F3 Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, Annales du Conseil souverain de la Martinique, vol. 244-246; ANOM Dépôt des papiers des colonies, greffes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre; ANOM Série C8 Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808); ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale.
\textsuperscript{37} The economic framing is particularly noticeable in official correspondence from the early eighteenth century. For example, see Charles Bernard to Joseph Jean Baptiste Fleuriau d’Armenonville, 2 September 1720, ANOM Série C8a, box 27, f. 351; Marquis de Feuquières to Comte de Maurepas, 30 October 1725, ANOM Série C8a, box 34, f. 113.
as the norm, but a closer look at differences between regions challenges that assumption.\textsuperscript{38}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Cases with Human Target</th>
<th>Total Cases with White Target (%)</th>
<th>Owner (%)</th>
<th>Other White (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B (1680-1839)</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6 (22%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S (1722-1825)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>27 (28%)</td>
<td>18 (19%)</td>
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<td>VA (1706-1784)</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>90 (66%)</td>
<td>*-</td>
<td>*-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA2 (1740-1840)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15 (71%)</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
<td>8 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (1730-1848)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>36 (43%)</td>
<td>21 (25%)</td>
<td>15 (18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: B = Bahia (full processos and cadernos), S = Suriname, VA = Virginia from Philip Schwarz’s data, VA2 = Virginia Cumberland and Brunswick Counties, M = Martinique. For Martinique, I have combine data from four different courts to make this table; the date range does not include date for each year (gaps: 1775-1802, 1810-21, 1827-29). For Bahia, while the surviving police devassas extend from 1751 through the end of my period, the vast majority range from 1810-39. For Suriname, the volumes from the following years have not survived: 1724-26, 1729, 1746, 1748, 1751, 1755-60, 1794-97, 1800, 1805, 1810, and 1814-20. Volumes do exist for 1801-04, 1806-09, and 1811-13, but I have not yet conducted research in them.

* Philip Schwarz does not specify in his table which white targets were owners or other Source: ANTT IL Series 28 and Series 30, vol. 55-131; NADH RVP vol. 783-913; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, Table 10 p. 96; LVA Brunswick CCOB vol. 1-36; LVA Cumberland CCOB vol. 1749-51 to 1844-51; ANOM Série F3 Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, Annales du Conseil souverain de la Martinique, vol. 244-246; ANOM Dépôt des papiers des colonies, greffes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre; ANOM Série C8 Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808); ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale. Schwarz’s analysis of Virginia slave crimes runs 1706 to 1784, but the first poison cases did not appear until 1730.

Bahia had relatively few cases with a stated target, and even fewer with white targets. Over a 160-year period, I found only a single case from Bahia of a slave accused of targeting their owner, and it was more complex than a slave trying to kill their owner. An enslaved man, Francisco Pereira, went to the inquisitorial commissioner himself to denounce another slave, Antonio, for trying to sell Francisco a root that he claimed to have used to “change” his master by putting it in his food.\textsuperscript{39} The case did not go anywhere. While Suriname and Martinique had a much higher proportion of cases with human targets than Bahia, over the entire period

\textsuperscript{38} For example, see Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 103-104; Fick, The Making of Haiti, 72-73; Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”, 224; Moitt, Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 139-146.

\textsuperscript{39} Denúncia de Antonio, 22 April 1748, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 106, p. 243.
respectively 26% and 43% of these cases had white targets. On the extreme end of the spectrum, Virginia had the largest proportion of whites as targets by a significant margin. In each location, targets sometimes overlapped to include both white and enslaved targets.

Slaves in Suriname, Martinique, and Virginia allegedly poisoned their owners in a several ways, most notably by placing something into food or drink consumed by the intended victim. In other words, slave owners brought slaves to court for poisoning owners in ways that were consistent with contemporary European ideas about poison. In 1769, Seba, Roselina, Quassiba, and Margo were tried for alleged poisoning on suspicion of putting herbs in their mistress’ soup in Suriname; likewise the Suriname court tried a group of slaves on Plantagie Paracabo three years earlier for attempting to poison their mistress by placing an unknown substance in her milk.40 As summaries, the Virginia contain very little detail. However, in several cases they do indicate an alleged method. In one of the earliest poison trials in the colony, a woman named Eve was burned at the stake after “feloniously and traitorously” mixing poison into the milk of her owner, Peter Montague—who languished for four months before dying.41 In four trials from 1763 to 1798, the slaves in question were accused of poisoning their owners under the guise of administering them medicine. In one of the most famous Caribbean poisoning cases, a thirty-five year old enslaved woman named Émilie was burned at the stake in 1806 for allegedly putting crushed glass in the ragout of Madame La Pagerie—the mother of Emperess Joséphine. Madame La Pagerie was not injured from the food, because she had been suspicious of the texture. She went directly to Captain General Louis Thomas Villaret de Joyeuse with her concerns; Villaret gave permission to his special tribunal to arrest and interrogate Émilie, burning her a day after

41 Trial of Eve, 23 January 1745, LVA Orange CCOB, vol. 4, p. 454-455. Philip Schwarz discusses this case, see Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 92.
convicting her of “forming a design to poison and kill” her mistress.\textsuperscript{42}

As alarmed as slaveholders were by threats to their lives and livelihood, they were horrified and offended by “taming” practices, where slaves sought to affect the emotions and behavior of slaveholders and overseers through magical means, usually purchased from a medical practitioner of African descent. These poison cases are particularly complex and fascinating, as they almost always targeted slaveholders, overseers, and drivers, but were intended to modify behavior rather than to harm.\textsuperscript{43} For owners, the idea of taming was a special threat for the implications for their power; slaves controlling the emotions of slaveholders would be a radical usurpation—a complete inversion—of the power hierarchies constructed and reinforced by slave societies. Slaveholders did not need to believe that such methods were effective in order to see them as a threat. The Society of Suriname, after hearing about the case of Bettie—accused of having poisoned her owner by giving him something to put him “in a good humor”—passed a resolution in 1749 outlawing such “superstitious, bad, and dangerous practices,” regardless of any ill effect. They described the presumption of slaves believing in the efficaciousness of such practices and attempting to use them as exceedingly dangerous to the colony.\textsuperscript{44} The Conseil Supérieur in Martinique had a similar discussion in the case of an unnamed enslaved man and woman in 1756, condemning black practitioners who sold “pretended secrets” to other slaves to make their owners agreeable and framing these practices, however ‘pretended,’ as a gateway to attempts to physically harm or kill slave owners.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} Copie d’un jugement rendu par le tribunal spécial de la Martinique condamnant à être brûlée vive la négresse Émilie, 9 June 1806, ANOM Série C8a, box 112, f. 210; Louis Thomas Villaret de Joyeuse to Denis Decrès, 15 June 1806, ANOM Série C8a, box 112, f. 219. This case is well known to scholars of the French Caribbean. For more details, see Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 87.
\textsuperscript{43} For more on the idea of taming, see Souza, The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross, 169; Reis, “Candomblé and Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” 69-70; Burnard and Garrigus, The Plantation Machine, 106-107; Reis, Divining Slavery and Freedom, 132-135.
\textsuperscript{44} Proces van Bolletrie en André, 29 May 1745, NADH RVP, vol. 798, n.p.
\textsuperscript{45} Procès d’un negro et une negresse (1756), 531-532.
Despite the fact that conjure packets and bundles were used in the nineteenth century for a wide range of purposes in Virginia, I did not find any specific references to “taming” practices targeting slave owners in my Virginia sources.\(^{46}\) Yvonne Chireau’s work notes slaves’ use of conjure in the nineteenth-century U.S. South to protect from violence and punish slaveholders, but not exactly to modify their behavior by altering their internal state.\(^{47}\) Intriguingly, there is some similarity between taming and the rhetoric of evangelical sensibility in the late eighteenth century that called on slave owners in Virginia to “soften” their hearts towards their slaves.\(^{48}\) The period from 1785 to 1790 was one of intense conversion in the Chesapeake, as free and enslaved people of African descent embraced evangelical Baptist and Methodist movements and made them their own.\(^{49}\) While black evangelicalism and conjure practices were complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, it is possible that taming efforts by slaves after the late eighteenth century may have found greater or at least more visible expression in the former than the latter.\(^{50}\)

As the eighteenth century trials from Virginia are limited in detail, more work would need to be done scouring plantation papers to be sure of an absence of “taming”—or at least an absence of slave owners’ awareness of such practices. Here the limitations of the sources created by slaveholders are apparent: it is difficult to know if slaves in eighteenth century Virginia attempted to use taming practices on their owners if these slaveholders did not write about them.

Slaveholders from the Chesapeake to Brazil did have a fraught relationship with black

\(^{46}\) For more on conjure packets and their uses, see Fett, Working Cures, 102.
\(^{48}\) Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 287-288.
\(^{50}\) Chireau, Black Magic, 6-8.
medical practitioners and their practices more generally: they frequently hired and depended on them for the medical care of their slaves—and, occasionally, themselves—but they did not entirely trust them. There was a tension between what slaveholders saw as the secret knowledge of these practitioners and their anxiety over the potential application of that knowledge outside of their own control.\textsuperscript{51} This anxiety was reflected in the poisoning laws of the 1740s, as well as the caveats that allowed for black medical practice under the full knowledge and consent of slave owners.\textsuperscript{52} One of the ways in which this unease over the dependence of plantations on practitioners’ knowledge manifested itself was through attempts to draw lines on which kinds of healing practices were acceptable and which were not. As early as 1682, Jesuit R. P. Mongin on Saint-Christophe set out a list of classifications and recommendations for action on what he described as types of slave magic. Mongin allowed tolerance for healers who use herbal remedies, but called for the suppression of any slaves who combine herbs with spells as these were connected to demons.\textsuperscript{53} The Lisbon Inquisition was also concerned with cures deriving from the power of demons and with policing the boundaries of what constituted legitimate practice.\textsuperscript{54} Their concern extended to priests incorporating some of the practices of black medical practitioners into their exorcisms, like the Dominican missionary Alberto de Santo Tomás who the Inquisition interrogated in 1713.\textsuperscript{55} Despite the disapproval of the church, many slaveholders in the western Atlantic sought to make use of the ritual healing practices of black medical practitioners.

\textsuperscript{51} Schwarz, \textit{Twice Condemned}, 101-102; Parrish, \textit{American Curiosity}, 285.
\textsuperscript{52} See Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of laws regarding poison.
\textsuperscript{53} Pluchon, \textit{Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs}, 15-16. Mongin’s full classification of slave magic is as follows: (1) sorcerers who make pacts with demons and should be stamped out, (2) slaves who use spells with herbs, are also connected to demons and should also be suppressed, (3) charlatans who dupe the simple and should be driven out, (4) healers who use herb remedies and can be tolerated.
\textsuperscript{54} For more on the Inquisition’s policing of popular magic and healing practices, see Walker, \textit{Doctors, Folk Medicine and the Inquisition}, and Sweet, \textit{Domingos Álvares}.
\textsuperscript{55} Mott, \textit{Bahia: Inquisição & Sociedade}, “Chapter 2 O Cônego João Calmon, Comissário do Santo Ofício na Bahia Setecentista.”
Slaveholders especially hired black practitioners to treat their slaves when faced with afflictions they considered mysterious or unusual.\textsuperscript{56} Jefferson himself had significantly hired one such individual, “Perkins’s Sam” to come to Monticello on two occasions to treat the strange declines of George Jr. and Sr.\textsuperscript{57} Sam was almost certainly the practitioner referred to in the 1800 letters, as both Jupiter and Ursula had gone to see the same “negro doctor who attended the George’s.”\textsuperscript{58} Since his semi-retirement to Monticello in 1794, Jefferson had occasionally paid white practitioners for medicine, but in only two instances did he pay for the services of an enslaved practitioner: both were for Sam to treat the Georges.\textsuperscript{59} Wealthy Westmoreland County slaveholder Robert Carter in the 1780s likewise hired enslaved black practitioners from fellow owners to treat unexplained illnesses. When Peter broke a few ribs after frightened horses upset the carriage, or a steer gored twelve-year-old Ben, or another boy named Sam fell out of a tree, R. Carter wrote to local white physicians to request their services, in Peter’s case dutifully listing the bleeding, salts, and glysters Carter had employed to keep Peter’s subsequent fever down.\textsuperscript{60} However, when a woman named Sukey was “greatly afflicted with Fits,” or Guy had been mysteriously “declining…about Eighteen Months,” or Katty was “subject to fits so as to deprive her of her Speech and [affect] her limbs a good deal,” R. Carter wrote to other Westmoreland


\textsuperscript{57} Since George, George Jr., and Ursula apparently had similar symptoms, with Ursula lingering for four months and George Jr. ill for nearly a year and a half, it is reasonable to conclude that Jefferson’s second payment to Sam in August 1799 was to treat George in the months before his death in November. Sam therefore was very likely the practitioner involved each of the four unusual Monticello deaths. For Jefferson’s two payments to “Perkins’s Sam,” see Jefferson’s Memorandum Books, 25 Nov 1798, 992; 24 Aug 1799, 1005.

\textsuperscript{58} Martha Jefferson Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 30 Jan 1800, \textit{The Papers of Thomas Jefferson}, vol. 31, 347-348 (see the footnote by Barbara Oberg); Thomas Mann Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, ca. 19 April 1800, \textit{The Papers of Thomas Jefferson}, vol. 31, 522-524.


\textsuperscript{60} Robert Carter to Dr. Thomas Thompson, 4 August 1786, Carter Letterbook VII, 138; Robert Carter to Dr. Timothy Harrington, 30 October 1787, Carter Letterbook VIII, 23; Robert Carter to Dr. Timothy Harrington, 30 July 1788, Carter Letterbook VIII, 155.
County slave owners to request the services of their enslaved practitioners.  

Slaveholders in Martinique, Bahia, and Suriname also hired black medical practitioners, especially, but not exclusively, to treat unusual afflictions. French colonists in the Caribbean often turned to enslaved healers in combination with European medical practitioners, who were under-certified, poorly paid, and a constant source of concern for medical reformers due to widespread malpractice. In Bahia, slaveholders frequently sought the services of free and enslaved medical practitioners of African descent to treat malevolent afflictions among themselves and their slaves. For example, Jacome Rodrigues put himself under the care of a well known “black feitiçeiro” Pedro Nunes, who used divination to identify an enslaved woman owned by Rodrigues, Philipa, as the source of his illness. Even the Jesuits at Sergipe de Conde, when overwhelmed by an outbreak of fevers in 1745, decided to experiment by sending one of the afflicted priests to stay with an “angola” near the coast for treatment. In Suriname, while overseers were responsible for maintaining the health of slaves on a plantation, they often outsourced medical care to enslaved medical practitioners. Even on the Virginia plantation of Landon Carter—Robert Carter’s uncle, who as an amateur physician ordered individual treatments in his plantation hospital himself—the actual work of medical care was undertaken by his enslaved assistants, Nassau and Tom, and not always according to L. Carter’s wishes. In fact, in medical opinion between L. Carter and his assistants sometimes led to differing medical

62 Pluchon, Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs, 19; Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, 1, 31-35, 50; Savage, “Black Magic and White Terror,” 645.  
64 Manoel de Magalhães to P. Francisco da Guerra, 18 May 1745, ANTT AJCJ, box 70, f. 120.  
treatments indignantly recorded in his diary.\textsuperscript{66}

Perceiving unsanctioned medical practice as a threat, slave owners used poison trials and the courts to police black medical practitioners. Concluding her thoughts on the Monticello poison case in a letter to her father, Martha Jefferson Randolph expressed regret that the practitioner “upon Jupiter’s death had absconded,” making it impossible to bring him to court, even though she thought “his murders sufficiently manifest to come under the cognizance of the law.”\textsuperscript{67} She was able to consider the practitioner’s actions as murder and envision bringing him to court because of a legal apparatus built over the eighteenth century in Virginia designed specifically to control enslaved medical practitioners; after 1748, the law criminalized unsanctioned practice as “poisonous medicine.”\textsuperscript{68} Neither Jefferson, Martha Jefferson Randolph, nor Thomas Mann Randolph discussed Perkins’s Sam as a threat or expressed a desire to bring him to court following the long illnesses and deaths of George and George Jr. In both cases, Jefferson paid Sam for coming to Monticello and treating the Georges. It was only after Jupiter and Ursula left Monticello on their own and traveled to Buckingham County to see Sam for the “means” that would “kill or cure” that Martha Jefferson Randolph pointed to Sam as a criminal.\textsuperscript{69} By the time of Ursula’s death in April, after she lingered for months with the same symptoms as her husband and son, Thomas Mann Randolph had retroactively ascribed the deaths of all four of the afflicted slaves to the “poisons of the Buckingham Negro conjuror.”\textsuperscript{70} If Martha Jefferson Randolph and her husband had been able to follow through in bringing Sam to court, he would

\textsuperscript{66} Carter, \textit{The Diary of Landon Carter}; cases where L. Carter believed medicines had been improperly administered or that his assistants had been negligent: Vol. 1, 201, 203, 411-412, 527; Vol. 2, 768, 774. Cases where L. Carter had not been informed of an illness or its progress: Vol. 1, 217-218, 219, 297, 377, 520; Vol. 2, 665, 776. Cases with a clear difference in medical treatment: Vol. 2. 774, 793. For more on Landon Carter and Nassau’s relationship, see Isaac, \textit{Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom}, “Chapter 6 Plantation Medical Science” and “Chapter 13 Landon and Nassaw.”
\textsuperscript{68} Hening, \textit{Statutes at Large}, vol. 4, 105.
\textsuperscript{70} Thomas Mann Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 19 Apr 1800, \textit{The Papers of Thomas Jefferson}, Vol. 31, 522-524.
have likely hanged or been whipped and branded as a poisoner for his unsanctioned practice.

While Virginia had the unique legal coding of “poisonous medicines” for such unsanctioned practice, laws and cases from Suriname, Martinique, and Bahia also show widespread interest in policing the activities of black medical practitioners. In the 1756 case of Bastien, a medical practitioner who said he had learned his secrets from his country in “Guinée,” the Martinique Conseil Supérieur ordered him whipped and branded not for doing an harm but for administering remedies with unknown drugs to numerous slaves. While some slaveholders in Bahia gave permission to enslaved medical practitioners to perform therapeutic and divinatory rituals on their plantations, their neighbors who complained to the Inquisition described these practices as diabolical—unsanctioned to say the least by the church. Medical practitioners who were maroons and outside the control of owners—like Coffij, who went about and treated slaves with a calabash with herbs and “vergift” (poison) in 1765 Suriname, or Zéphir, who traveled about 1768 Martinique making, distributing, and selling many kinds of “maléfices et poisons”—were also considered unsanctioned and extremely dangerous.

Another way owners sought to manage their slaves during poisoning events was to insert themselves into the rituals of public healing and investigations to identify poisoners led by black medical practitioners. In Bahia, several slaveholders were denounced to the Inquisition for not only allowing black medical practitioners to perform calundús (ritual therapeutic and divinatory dances) but in some cases taking a participatory and profiteering role. Secret denunciations to the inquisitorial commissioner named slaveholders Pedro Coelho Pimentel in 1686, Pedro de

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71 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of these laws in greater detail. See Chapter 5 for more details on black medical practitioners.
73 For an example, see Denúncia de Mai Catherina, 12 May 1704, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 76, p. 41-42.
Sesquira Barbosa in 1701, and Manoel Lopes in 1743 for their roles in such practices.\footnote{Denúncia de Pedro Coelho Pimentel, 28 March 1686, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 59, p. 135; Denúncia de Branca e Pedro de Sesqueira Barbosa, 14 August 1701, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 81, p. 239-248; Denúncia de Manoel Lopes e Barbara da Silva, 9 January 1743, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 113, p. 188.} In the denunciation of Pimentel, he and his wife Maria Pereira were well known to have purchased the enslaved medical practitioners in question specifically for the purpose of making money off of their reputation as healer-diviners. Barbosa likewise made a tidy profit from the *calundús* run by his slave, Branca. Like other slaveholders, Lopes hired out one of his enslaved medical practitioners in the city of Salvador to perform *calundús* and cure afflictions caused by *feitiços*.\footnote{See Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, “Chapter 4 Rio de Janeiro, for more discussion of hiring out practices and medicine in urban Brazil.”} Although these three cases did not go anywhere beyond the denunciations, they are intriguing for the glimpses they offer of the ways owners attempted to control both their slaves and black medical practitioners. Granting permission for ritual healing practice was a form of control.

In Martinique, several cases involved slave owners taking a more physical role in divinatory rituals run by slaves. French doctor Jean de Laborde, who resided at the time in Cayenne but had spent years in both Saint-Domingue and Martinique, reported in disdain in 1775 on slaveholders’ “superstitious” methods. Such methods included digging up the heart of a poisoned slave and damaging it with quicklime or a firebrand to make the “author of the poisons” fall into convulsions, as well as to line up suspects and tap them gently with the branch of a certain tree with similar results.\footnote{de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”} While I did not find instances of the former in the Conseil Supérieur trials—perhaps Laborde was referencing a passage from Père Jean-Baptiste Labat on poisoning—the ritual with the branch appeared in at least two cases. In the case of an unnamed slave from 1755, the owner, suspecting one man of poisoning another, tapped him with a small branch of the *medecineir* tree (*Jatropha curcas*), with the expectation from commonly held
opinion that doing so would cause the poisoner and “distributor of spells and malefices” agony.

Tapped by the branch, the man collapsed into convulsions, and confessed to the poisoning.\(^7\) The incident in a 1767 case offers more intriguing details, as the slaveholder Lahuassaye Due Cipre had a three-year-old enslaved girl place the branch of the medecinier tree on the man, Jacques, he suspected of poisoning.\(^7\) Apparently, this practice, including the role of the child, was still prevalent enough in the early nineteenth century that Pierre-Clément de Laussat noted its continued use in a journal entry from 1807.\(^8\) Known in English as the “physic nut,” “Barbados nut,” and “poison nut” tree, \textit{Jatropha curcas} has oily seeds that have been used as a purgative; physical contact with the branch or leaves alone would not explain a physical reaction like the convulsions and agonized cries described in these cases.\(^8\) In both cases, slave owners had a central role in using the ritual—with the wider participation of the enslaved communities on each plantation—to try and identify culprits allegedly responsible for the afflictions and deaths of other slaves.

The descriptions I found of slaveholders turning to slaves for magical help—especially for conducting rituals to identify poisoners—were predominantly from Bahia and Martinique. While instances of slaveholders hiring black medical practitioners known for sorcery practices certainly appeared in cases from Virginia and the Dutch Guianas, I did not find evidence of slaveholders’ direct participatory role in curing rituals. Clergymen in Martinique and Bahia were

\(^7\) Procès d’un negre, January 1755, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 300. Pierre Pluchon also discusses this case, see Pluchon, \textit{Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs}, 159-160.

\(^8\) Procès de Jacques (1767), 407-414.

\(^8\) Laussat, Memoires, 13 Sep 1807, vol. 1, p. 87-88.

\(^8\) \textit{Jatropha curcas}, Kew Science, Plants of the World Online, accessed 4 December 2018, [http://plantsoftheworldonline.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:131462-2](http://plantsoftheworldonline.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:131462-2) In contrast, see the manceniller or manchineel tree (\textit{Hippomane mancinella}), a tree still common today in Martinique mangrove swamps, which was well known for causing severe rashes on contact as early as Cosomo Bruni’s 1660 report on the island. See “Description des îles d’Amerique en l’estat qu’elles estoient l’année 1660, 6 April 1660, ANOM Série C8b, box 1, f. 3. One of Thomas Walduck’s letters from 1712 also mentions this tree, and treatments for the inflammation caused by contact. See Thomas Walduck to James Petiver, Letter 8, n.d. (1712), BL Sloane Manuscripts, vol. 2302.
dismayed at slave owners turning to their slaves for magical help. Even before official poison trials existed, Père Labat described owners he met in 1698 “going over” to their slaves by using occult means to identify malefactors on their plantations.82 A slaveholder friend of Labat on a sugar plantation on Martinique, believing several of his slaves to have been murdered by sorcery, cut open one of the bodies, removed the heart, and buried it with certain ceremonies in quicklime with the intention of thus killing the sorcerer. Embarrassed by the scandal, Labat went to his friend and delicately reproached him for not providing a good Christian example to his slaves. Labat’s interference was unwelcome: “he said that although I [Labat] was his Curé, I should not enter into his domestic affairs...he warned me once and for all not to trouble myself with his conscience, nor that of his slaves; but only to make the evil spells of the slaves on our plantation stop.”83

Labat described an encounter with a black medical practitioner on a Martinique plantation that highlights both his battles against African sorcery and an emerging concern with unsanctioned medical practice by slaves in the late seventeenth century. After the local surgeons had given up on an enslaved woman, who had been mysteriously ill for some time, she was taken (presumably by the owner) to the slaves, who often got “involved in treating these sorts of ills” as slaveholders expected them to “know the composition, & sometimes the remedy” for poisons.84 Suspicious of interference, Labat prevented the slaves from giving the woman any medicine and tried to bring back the surgeon. Later that night he heard the woman crying, broke into her hut, and discovered a crowd of slaves from multiple plantations with a “sorcier,” incense, a small sack with various ingredients, and a figurine. A voice had apparently spoken

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83 Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux iles de l’Amerique*, vol. 4, 192-193. Labat, normally not shy on giving graphic details of slave practices and the punishments meted out for them, is frustratingly coy on the details of the slaveholder’s actions: “he placed it [the heart] in quicklime, with certain ceremonies that it is not necessary to report here.”
84 Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux iles de l’Amerique*, vol. 1, 495.
through the figurine to inform the crowd that the woman would die in four days. Labat then severely punished the sorcerer, destroyed the ritual objects in front of the horrified slaves, and informed the slaveholder of his proceedings. Specifically, by his own account, Labat tied up the sorcerer, gave him 300 lashes with a whip, placed the figurine in front of him and told the crying slave to ask the devil to deliver him. When the gathered slaves “tremble[d]” at his disrespect towards the figurine and said that it will kill him, Labat burned it along with the rest of the ritual objects and threw the ashes into the river. He then had the sorcerer put in irons and his wounds rubbed with a common combination of hot pepper and lemon juice (both extremely painful and useful for preventing gangrene). Labat brought the sorcerer to his owner, who promised to pay Labat for his trouble and whipped the slave again “in good manner.” Labat later remarked that the enslaved woman did indeed die on the fourth day, in his analysis due to the effect on her imagination, but as he was able to hear her last confession he “had the consolation to see her die a good Christian.” 85

Several key details stand out from this account. First, Labat claimed slaveholders frequently relied on enslaved healers when surgeons were ineffective. Second, these owners connected slave expertise particularly with knowledge of poisons. Third, the ritual practices that accompanied healing for a suspected poisoning involved a ritual specialist and a network of slaves across plantations gathering to consult a spirit via a figurine and other ritual objects, interpreted by Labat as superstitious idolatry. This incident from the 1680s, preceding Martinique’s laws on medical practice, highlights both a religious concern with idolatry and sorcery and the emergence of slaveholders’ concern with unsanctioned and potentially dangerous ritual practices of slaves.

If poisoning events signified a crisis of mastery, slave owners constructed knowledge

about poison as another strategy of regaining control. Identifying, assessing, and theorizing about poison, poisoners, and motives became ways to make poison knowable and conquerable. In crafting their ideas, slaveholders created a “common knowledge” of poison that drew on multiple sources. In addition to contemporary European ideas, they also drew upon personal experience, conversations with each other, and reading anecdotes of poisoning events in works by other slave owners and observers. This “common knowledge” diverged in several significant ways from the cases that were actually being tried—let alone the perspectives of black medical practitioners and enslaved communities; slaveholders had built their own imaginary of poisoning.

“Common knowledge” is not really common, but specific to time, place, and perspective. Slaveholders from the late seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries constructed and repeated ideas about poisoning in conversations with each other. While denunciations made to the inquisitorial commissioners in Bahia were supposed to be secret, it is clear from reading the interviews from subsequent investigations that slaveholders—as well as slaves and free people of color—gossiped with each other constantly. In over a dozen cases from the cadernos do promotor reputation and public knowledge were explicitly discussed as key pieces of evidence.86

In Martinique, Suriname, and Virginia, poison trials were public affairs, and key pieces of poison legislation passed by legislators made up of slaveowners were also widely circulated. For example, at the end of the 1766 trial of Jean Baptiste and thirty other defendants in Martinique for poisoning, the General Prosecutor of the King ordered a bulletin made up containing the names of all of the free and enslaved people of African descent involved or implicated in the case and distributed to each jurisdiction of the colony. Three years later, during the poison trial of Paul and Nanette, their owner included the fact that Paul’s name was on the list as the reason

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86 For a particularly good example, see Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 25 July 1746, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 118, p. 90-94.
behind his suspicion of the pair when livestock began to die.\(^8^7\) The gruesome public executions of convicted poisoners in the square in front of the Fort Zeelandia—and the heads frequently mounted in the river as a warning—also helped create and spread ideas about poisoning and poisoners among slave owners. Trials begat trials, and the more owners discussed poisoning the more they saw it everywhere.

The correspondence of Martinican slaveholder Pierre Dessalles, a powerful owner of a sugar plantation in Sainte-Marie in the early nineteenth century, illustrates well some of the many channels of conversation through which slaveholders constructed “common knowledge” on poison. Dessalles frequently wrote his mother, residing in France, with local news and updates on the plantation. Over a series of forty-four letters to her from 1822 to 1826, Dessalles described the poisoning terror surrounding the Cour Prévôtale in great detail.\(^8^8\) Dessalles was well informed; he was a member of the Conseil Supérieur. In one of his letters, he told his mother how he spent the previous day “interrogating the guilty” at Mme. Levassor’s plantation.\(^8^9\) Many of his letters included a tally of recent losses of slaves and livestock from his neighbors, sometimes merging the categories together with a focus on the economic implications of the losses. For example, one widow Mme. Litté was “totally ruined” after loosing 46 “head” combined of cattle and enslaved people, resulting in the arrest of several of her slaves.\(^9^0\)

Much of Dessalles’ information came from conversations with other slaveholders. One

\(^8^7\) Three different enslaved men named “Paul” were tried as part of the 1766 Jean Baptiste case. One “Paul, called Coq” was owned by Sr. Dusquesne du Lombrin, the man who brought Paul and Nanette to trial. Paul/Coq had been found not guilty in the 1766 case and released back to Duesquesne. Procès de Jean Baptiste et outres (1766), 267-275; Procès de Paul et Nanette, March 1769, ANOM Série F3, vol. 246, p. 617-619.

\(^8^8\) Caroline Oudin-Bastide also examines these letters in detail, see Oudin-Bastide, *L’effroi et la terreur*, p. 104-108, 183-184.

\(^8^9\) Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 2 August 1824, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 125.

\(^9^0\) Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 28 July 1824, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 123-124. For the trial, see Procès de Barbe et outres, 16 August 1824, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, n.p. Out of the sixteen defendants in this case, Valentin, Joachim, Louison, and Audelan were the people owned by Mme. Litté. Valentin, Joachim, and Louison were convicted and sentenced to the galleys in France for life. Audelan, who had evaded capture by running, was executed in effigy.
night in July 1824, a neighboring slaveholder, M. Catala, was over for dinner when several of Dessalles mules were discovered sick. Dessalles had recently noted that the plantations all around him had been suffering severe losses of slaves and livestock, but that so far his constant vigilance had prevented any losses of his own.  

Catala told Dessalles that he had observed the same symptoms in his mules that had died, and that night they gathered all of the slaves on Dessalles plantation and spoke to them. When they discovered a mule dead the next day, Dessalles and Catala opened the mule’s body for an amateur autopsy. “We acquired the most certain proof of his illness; it is poison that killed him.” In the same month, Dessalles reported a vehement argument between two slave owners on whether an epizootic could have possibly been responsible for the deaths—Dessalles sided with the majority that this claim was “an irony, or sarcasm thrown at misfortune.” He also wrote his cousin, a M. Lasalle, sharing with him the extreme measures he had taken against poisoning on his plantation, including random whippings, taking away Saturdays and Sundays, and forbidding slaves to enter their cabins except to sleep.  

As the Cour Prévôtale continued, Dessalles related discussions on the “scourge.” He told his mother of a case in Robert about ten miles away, where it was now “widely believed that the current poison [came] from free people of color, who give bad advice to the slaves.” Dessalles was in constant contact with the other slave owners in his neighborhood and beyond, and poisoning in the early 1820s was a constant source of discussion.

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91 Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 4 July 1824, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 114.  
92 Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 12 July 1824, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 116-118.  
93 Copy of a letter from M. Lasalle to Pierre Dessalles, 18 July 1824, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 121-122.  
94 Copy of a letter from M. Lasalle to Pierre Dessalles, 121; Copy of a letter Pierre Dessalles to M. Lasalle, 18 July 1824, , *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 122-123.  
95 Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 22 January 1925, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 139-140.  
96 Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 18 February 1825, *La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle*, 143. The trial in question was the largest single case handled by the Cour Prévôtale and in my entire dataset, involving 62 defendants. The case resulted in eleven executions, forty-two sentences of other punishments (including labor for life in the French galleys, banishment, and whippings), and nine slaves discharged back to their plantations. See Procès de Charlotte et outres, 6 May 1825, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, n.p.
Slaveholders not only spoke to each other, but also read, wrote, and appeared in travel narratives, histories, and natural histories that often contained discussions of poisoning. Through these works, slaveholders framed themselves as key creators of knowledge in the Atlantic, experts on everything from plantation management to botany to local events. Historians have examined the ways in which the authors of these works—not all of whom were slaveholders themselves—sought to enter into European circles of natural history, but these works also contained information on how slaveholders managed their knowledge of poison. Jesuit André João Antonil spent thirty-five years from the 1680s to 1710s living in Bahia—precisely during the period when denunciations regarding feitiçaria began to increase. Though not a slaveholder himself, in his Cultura e opulencia do Brasil por suas drogas e minas (1711) Antonil wrote extensively on the economic situation of the colony and related stories from the slaveholders he spoke with. In arguments with owners who opposed marriages among their slaves, they cited poisoning as the reason for their reluctance. Some sugar planters of the Recôncavo held firmly to the idea that married slaves eventually poisoned themselves. While that particular idea does not appear to have spread, Antonil’s reporting of their conviction on the danger of slaves’ expertise with feitiços (sorcery objects) and veneno (poison) and the risk of slaves avenging harms done to their relatives by poisoning other slaves. Labat, who was residing in Martinique at about the same time as Antonil traveled in Brazil, had more direct experience than Antonil with poisoning cases as he lived at the Saint-Jacques sugar plantation—the same plantation that later shocked

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97 For works in the robust subfield exploring natural histories in the Atlantic, see in particular Grove, Green Imperialism; Schiebinger, Plants and Empire; Parrish, American Curiosity; Cañizares-Esguerra, Nature, Empire, and Nation; Breen, “Tropical Transplantations.”
98 André João Antonil, Cultura e opulencia do Brasil por suas drogas e minas, Com varias noticias curiosas do modo de fazer o Assucar; plantar & beneficiar o Tabaco; tirar Ouro das Minas; & descubrir as da Prata (Lisbon: Na Officina Real Deslandesiana, 1711), 24. This was not a universally held opinion among slaveholders, many of whom forced marriage choices upon their slaves. See Sweet, Recreating Africa, 41, and the entirety of “Chapter 2 Kinship, Family, and Household Formation.”
99 Antonil, Cultura e opulencia, 28.
Pierre Clément de Laussat with the private prison for suspected poisoners—for over a decade.100 His descriptions of the practices of African “sorcerers” in Nouveau voyage aux îles de l’Amerique (1722), mentioned above, had a major impact on later British and French colonial writings on obeah, vaudou, and poisoning.101 This celebrated work was reprinted in new editions in 1724 and 1742, and though it was not translated into English until the twentieth century, English speaking slave owners like Edward Long and Bryan Edwards had no trouble reading and referencing his work in their own on a range of subjects.102 For the late eighteenth century, John Gabriel Stedman’s Narrative of a five year’s expedition (1796) on his military experiences in Suriname in the 1770s was also both widely read—going into three English editions in 1796, 1806, and 1813 and rapidly translated into Dutch, French, German by 1800—and contained abundant discussions with slaveholders, free people of color, and slaves on poisoning and sorcery. Writing about poisoning events was a way of exercising control over them; reading and theorizing about them not only helped spread ideas but constituted a similar act of reclaiming mastery.

To illustrate the ways slaveholders tried to make poisoning events comprehensible through these works, I will explore the history of two durable, though not unchanging, ideas expressed in them from the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries: the first, that poisoners had direct connection to training in poisoning in Africa, and the second, that poisoners shared a method involving hiding powdered poison under a fingernail. Officials and missionaries stationed in Portuguese Angola in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries discussed Africa as a

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100 For more on Labat’s time in Martinique, see Pluchon, Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs, 19-26.
“poisoned landscape,” filled not only with the flora and fauna of a treacherous climate but also people highly skilled and trained in poisoning. Owners in the slave societies of the western Atlantic also made links to ‘Africanness’ when discussing slaves and poisoning. The slaveholders interviewed by Antonil during his travels in the late seventeenth century shared their opinion that their slaves who killed with poison/sorcery had among them many “Masters distinguished in this Art.” Labat similarly claimed that almost all of the adult men from Africa in Martinique had at least some knowledge on “sorcery and poison.” Nearly a century later, and writing on Saint-Domingue, Moreau de Saint-Méry claimed that a quarter of the slaves brought from Africa were sorcerers proficient in “the odious art of poisoning.” Even those who were skeptical on the veracity (and legality) of the eighteenth-century peaks in poisoning trials, like Jean de Laborde, took as a given that the expertise of enslaved poisoners was linked to their Africanness. Laborde even referenced voyagers who assured him that “in their country there are schools where one teaches this infernal art.”

The link between poisoning and Africanness was so strong that during the British occupation of Martinique in 1814 Governor Charles Wales wrote to his superiors that, although “native” Africans were “addicted” to “that nefarious practice of Obiah, witchcraft or Poisoning (all of which may be here called synonymous),” he could happily report a decrease in poisoning cases in relation to the ending of the transatlantic slave trade. Wales connected his triumphant satisfaction at the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, “no less conducive to Humanity than to the interest of the Planters,” to the improvement of the colony that had previously been

103 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 144-157, see entirety of “Chapter 3 Fetishizing Drugs: Feitiçaria and Poison in West Central Africa.”
104 Parrish, American Curiosity, 273-274. See the entirety of “Chapter 7 African Magi, Slave Poisoners.”
105 Antonil, Cultura e opulencia, 24.
“depopulated” by poisoning. Wales here referred to not only “the loss of those actually poisoned, but also of many innocent victims who fell sacrificed to suspicion, occasioning brutal acts of cruelty and a mutual want of confidence between the master and his slave.”\textsuperscript{109} There is a lot to analyze in this remarkable letter. Wales had no problem eliding \textit{obeah}, witchcraft, and poisoning, reflecting the ways that people recognized similar practices and concepts under different labels.\textsuperscript{110} Wales also framed the poison trials themselves and the distrust they engendered as a social ill being cured by Britain’s ending of the transatlantic slave trade. Wales’ prediction that poisonings declined with the declining proportion of Africans in the population did not hold, given the many creoles were accused of poisoning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the fact that Martinique was yet to experience its most convulsive and final major wave of poisoning accusations in the 1820s. Most significantly for our discussion here, Wales repeated what was a widely shared idea on the connection between poison and Africanness.

The peculiar trope of poison hidden under fingernails emerged in the late seventeenth century and had a robust longevity over the eighteenth century. To be clear, I am not here referring to fingernails used as an ingredient in poisons, but of a method whereby a poisoner/sorcerer—especially one of African descent—would hide powdered poison under a fingernail to surreptitiously dip into the drink of their target before handing them the cup.\textsuperscript{111} Yet in all of the 515 poison cases I examined, I found only one involving the fingernail method. While this absence in trials does not necessarily mean a complete absence in practice, the gap between discussion of the method and the trials themselves is significant. The single case where the method appeared sheds doubt on the method’s use while highlighting its prominence in

\textsuperscript{109} Governor Charles Wales to Lord Bathurst, 14 February 1814, NA-Kew WO 1 West Indies and South America, box 47. Thank you to Alix Rivière for sharing this fascinating letter with me.

\textsuperscript{110} Wales’ letter stands in interesting contrast to the difference between British conceptions of \textit{obeah} and French conceptions of \textit{poison} explored by Diana Paton. See Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery.”

\textsuperscript{111} For more on fingernails as an ingredient in conjure packets in the U.S. South, see Fett, \textit{Working Cures}, 102.
slaveholders’ imaginary of poisoning. In 1742, and in connection with a series of cases roiling the colony of Suriname, a man named Picard was convicted on the basis of a five part confession: that he had been taught by another slave to mix poison in food, drink, and tobacco; that he once observed another enslaved man, Klass, make a powder from dried fish and *wiriwiri* (magical herbs), hide it under his fingernail, and dip it into a dram; that Picard himself had mixed the powder into a calabash and given it to the new horses; that he had also poisoned an enslaved woman; and that two other slaves he knew had poisoned whites by putting an unspecified substance in their water.\(^{112}\) Picard admitted to observing the fingernail method in a confession that was extracted—by unspecified means—by his owner Andres Wossink on the plantation, a confession that was delivered to the court as the primary piece of evidence against him. The circumstances of this confession suggest that Picard told Wossink, and later the court, what they wanted to hear: a story of poisoning that confirmed to their expectations of how African poisoners operated and centered on the ingestion of poisons in food and drink.

The history of the idea of the fingernail method had an interesting path in the Atlantic that included a wide range of supposed poisoners—not all of whom were of African descent. In exploring this idea, I found references to Africans, Indians, and Jesuits authoritatively identified as masters of the technique. In 1700 the Earl of Bellomont, Governor of New York, reported a series of poisonings among the Onondaga involving an Indian woman from New France whom the Jesuits had “taught to poison as well as to pray.” Bellomont identified the Jesuits as the origin of her technique. Allegedly, they “had furnished her with so subtil [sic] a poison and taught her a leger de main in using it, so that whoever she had a mind to poison, she would drink to em a

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\(^{112}\) *Proces van Picard, 4 August 1742, NADH RVP* vol. 795, n.p. Like many others in 1742, Picard was condemned to be branded, pinched with hot tongs until head, and his head mounted on a spike in the Paramaribo harbor. See Chapter 5 for a more detailed breakdown of this series of cases connected to the construction of the New Fort Amsterdam.
cup of water and let drop the poison from under her nail, (which were always very long, for the Indians never pare ‘em) into the cup.”

Transatlantic English anti-Catholic sentiment—combined with the border tensions between the English, the French, and their respective indigenous allies just three years following the close of King William’s War and only two years before Queen Anne’s War—undoubtedly influenced Bellomont’s ascription of such a devious poisoning strategy to a Jesuit and his unnamed native apprentice. Labat described a similar incident on a plantation near Saint Jacques in Martinique, where an enslaved man confessed to hiding a poison made from plants gathered from the sea under a long fingernail and dipping it into the brandy of over thirty other slaves. By the time Edward Long wrote his *History of Jamaica* in 1774, his description of the technique—in this instance apparently used by both Indians and Africans—had changed to a rather elaborate description of placing powdered worms that had been bred from putrefying cassava juice under a thumb nail, grown long for the purpose, and skillfully dipped into a drink to “impregnate” it. Anthony Blom, a former overseer turned plantation owner in Suriname who published a work on agriculture and plantation management in 1786, warned overseers to watch out for the technique of hiding powdered poison under a fingernail. John Gabriel Stedmen in two separate sections likewise credited the “Accawaw Indians” and *wissimen* (sorcerers) of African descent for their skill and treachery in hiding

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poisons that cause slow lingering deaths under their fingernails to administer in beverages.\textsuperscript{118} Stedman further stated in a footnote that “After the most scrupulous enquiry, and even ocular demonstration, I can assert the above as literally true.” None of the ten poisoning cases tried during Stedman’s time in Suriname from 1773 to 1777 made reference to the fingernail trope, and the idea of him physically observing someone hide poison under their nails and kill someone is a bit absurd.\textsuperscript{119} I think it far more likely that Stedman repeated the kind of “common knowledge” that slave owners in Suriname and across the slave societies of the western Atlantic had constructed on the dreaded fingernail method. In both 1775 and 1804 French colonial officials in Martinique reported on widespread belief among slaveholders of slaves poisoning by means of hiding powders under their fingernails—Laussat added a new twist by describing “learned sorcerers” among the enslaved mixing the poisonous sap from the \textit{manchineel} tree (\textit{Hippomane mancinella}) with a gummy substance to more effectively hide it under their nails.\textsuperscript{120}

Where did this idea of the fingernail method come from? While frequently ascribed to Africans, it did not appear in the first hand accounts of Bosman, Barbot, Atkins, or Matthews. To the best of my knowledge, the earliest reference of the fingernail method in relation to Africa came from a 1686 work by Robert Boyle. Boyle shared an anecdote from a man who had traveled in Senegambia:

A sober gentleman, who was governour of a colony in the torrid zone, and had sailed far up the river \textit{Gambra in Africa}, assured me, that the blacks had a poison, slow and mortal, the dose whereof is so small, that they usually hide enough to kill a man under one of their nails; from whence they very dextrously [sic] convey it into any liquid aliment, for the person they design it. He added, that in another part of \textit{Africa}, a famous knight, who commanded the \textit{English} there, and lately died in his passage home, was in this manner poison’d by a young \textit{Negro} woman

\textsuperscript{118} Stedman, \textit{Narrative of a five years’ expedition} (1796), vol. 1, p. 404; vol. 2, p. 266-267.
\textsuperscript{119} NADH RVP, vol. 823-829.
Boyle’s anecdote contained several key elements repeated in the eighteenth-century works: hiding the poison under fingernails, dipping these nails into a beverage, and a certain degree of admiration for the dexterity and skill involved. The second part, on an English knight poisoned in this manner by an African woman, connects these ideas to both a European sense of the gendered dynamics and political intrigue related to poison. The fingernail trope was interconnected with slaveholders’ ideas about both poison as a “weapon of the weak” and Africans as trained and highly proficient poisoners; it is striking as a piece of shared “common knowledge” that appears to have had little or possibly no basis in actual practice in the western Atlantic.

Confronted with strange or unexplained illnesses, slaveholders often came up with explanations of their own that resonated with their own medical ideas. A close analysis of the reactions of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Mann Randolph, and Martha Jefferson Randolph to the events in the 1800 Monticello case underscores both the variety of slaveholder responses and the shared importance of making these cases knowable—in that sense to bring them under conceptual control. Pointedly ignoring his daughter’s description of Jupiter’s strange convulsions, Jefferson repeatedly described his death as the result of an ordinary, if severe, illness exacerbated by exhaustion and culminating in Jupiter’s journey to Randolph Jefferson’s plantation. Upon his arrival in Philadelphia, Jefferson told Thomas Mann Randolph “I had left Jupiter [in Fredericksburg] very sick, & having heard nothing of him since am not without

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anxiety. I think his complaint of very doubtful event, tho it may be of some time.\textsuperscript{122} After hearing of Jupiter’s subsequent death, Jefferson elaborated on Jupiter’s state during the three-day trip. On February 4th he wrote to again to his son-in-law, “[Jupiter] has fallen a victim to an imprudent perseverance in journeying…and it seems that immediately on his arrival at home, he took another journey to my brother’s where he died.” Jupiter had been ill, as Martha Jefferson Randolph noted “for some time past,” and Jefferson was “extremely against his [Jupiter’s] coming…[I] had engaged Davy Bowles [an enslaved man living in nearby Milton], but Jupiter was so much disturbed by this that I yielded.”\textsuperscript{123} Less than a week later Jefferson wrote Richard Richardson, George’s replacement as the new overseer at Monticello, “I am sincerely concerned for the death of Jupiter, which I am persuaded might have been prevented could I have prevailed on him to give up going with me to Fredericksburg, or to have stopped the 2d day… I suppose the journey to my brother’s completed [sic] the business.”\textsuperscript{124} For Jefferson, Jupiter’s death was the unfortunate result of irrational stubbornness tinged with tragic loyalty and pride in his work.

An alternative explanation for strange deaths centered on a lack of proper care. Martha Jefferson Randolph and Thomas Mann Randolph ascribed first the illnesses of Jupiter and Ursula, then the deaths of all four afflicted slaves, to a concrete cause in the “poison” administered by an enslaved practitioner in Buckingham County. Martha Jefferson Randolph claimed that Jupiter had felt better, or at least no worse, after drinking Randolph Jefferson’s “dram,” likely whiskey or some other spirit, but fell into convulsions after taking “the means” from the “black doctor.” For her, the ‘poisonous’ medicine of black practitioners was a menace, tantamount to murder or at least malpractice that prevented the operation of a true cure.

\textsuperscript{123} Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, 4 Feb 1800, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 31, 359-361. According to Oberg, Richardson’s letter informing Jefferson of Jupiter’s death has not been found.
After Ursula’s death in April, Thomas Mann Randolph drew upon the medical theories of his day to put forward a theory on how the ‘poison’ physically worked:

The poisons of the Buckingham Negroe conjuror appear to have a power of unstringing the whole system beyond recovery in a short time; of destroying the elasticity or rather the Vital Virtue of muscular fibre & nervous thread in a few weeks or days as completely in a healthy African slave as the abuse of natural gratifications for years in the luxurious rich, or quantities of Ardent Spirit in those who are just above labor.125

Thomas Mann Randolph used an image of an unraveling body, its “fibers” and “threads” unstrung by the power of the poison, rendering the afflicted listless, undone. His discussion on “Vital Virtue” connected to contemporary emergence of a new physiology in mid to late eighteenth-century Europe, what Roy Porter describes as “biological materialism.”126 In this conception, the mechanical body worked through the responses of fibers in muscles and organs to external stimuli, operating like pulleys or strings. By subsuming the effects of the ‘poison’ under current medical theory, Thomas Mann Randolph rendered the incident knowable, even if the exact contents of the “means” remained unidentified.

Slaveholders also filled the gap between the knowable and the unexplained with psychological explanations for strange symptoms. Towards the end of his April letter to Jefferson, Thomas Mann Randolph mused, “The poisons of the Conjurer have the most astonishing effect in producing melancholy & despair—perhaps greatly operative in the catastrophe.”127 In this rendering, Ursula’s listlessness and Jupiter’s inability to speak in the days leading up to his death become the effects of superstition and evidence of the dangerous power men like the “conjuror” could have on the minds of other slaves.128 This explanatory idea was shared in the perceived psychological powers of black practitioners over slaves in the western

Atlantic.\textsuperscript{129}

Another way for slave owners to try and establish conceptual control in poisoning events was through autopsies and tests of suspicious substances claimed to be poison. At the heart of these investigations was the idea that the poisons were physical substances that, while currently unknown to slaveholders, could be known; to make them knowable was to diminish their power. Autopsies and tests were ways to uncover, in the words of the Martinique Conseil Supérieur, “the Science of their detestable art.”\textsuperscript{130} In the 1781 case of Masongoe in Suriname, suspected of poisoning through the use of obis, doctors hired by the court both tested the wiriwiri Masongoe claimed were only used to treat illnesses—finding nothing harmful—and performed an autopsy on the body of his deceased patient, an enslaved man named Mingo. Apparently, the presence of blood in Mingo’s lungs was convincing enough for the court to convict Masongoe.\textsuperscript{131}

Martinique stands out for the legal requirements established for autopsies during the acceleration and peak of poisoning cases in the mid-eighteenth century. Here, the colonial government considered autopsies so essential for establishing proof that they passed an ordinance in 1749 requiring slave owners to have a surgeon open the bodies of slaves or livestock suspected of having been poisoned; said surgeon then had to submit a report as evidence to the court.\textsuperscript{132} The fact that the council had to repeat this mandate in a 1758 ordinance, stressing the necessity of the presence of a trained surgeon, suggests that slaveholders conducted their own autopsies—or not—as they pleased and were confident enough to bring cases to the

\textsuperscript{129} Bryson, “The Art of Power,” 65-66; Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror,” 645; Boaz, “Instruments of Obeah,” 147; Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{130} Procès de Marie Therese et Thélémaque, May 1773, ANOM Série F3, vol. 246, p. 699-700.
\textsuperscript{131} Proces van Masongoe, 11 December 1781, NADH RVP, vol. 839, p. 278-282v.
\textsuperscript{132} Ordonnance concernant les nègres empoisonneurs, 5 November 1749, ADM Série B, vol. 8, p. 130-131; Marquis de Caylus to Antoine Louis Rouillé, 4 October 1749, ANOM Série C8a, box 58, f. 258.
court without the required autopsy. Jean de Laborde, a fierce critic of the way slaveholders
“neither competent nor capable” handled poisoning cases, noted that in all his time as a doctor in
Martinique, Saint-Domingue, and Cayenne over the past two decades not once was he called to
the court to perform an autopsy. Even without formal ordinances, owners sometimes made use
of autopsies and various tests as part of their efforts to create knowledge on poisoning events. As
mentioned above, on at least two occasions Pierre Dessalles— who was not a doctor— opened the
bodies of livestock he suspected to have been poisoned himself and was satisfied in his
examination proving that poison was responsible.

Intriguing as these tests were, they did not always matter for the outcome of cases in
courts. In fact, autopsies and chemical tests of suspected poisons were described much more in
correspondence and reports on poisoning than in actual cases, only explicitly appearing in nine
cases in my dataset. The low number of cases that describe such tests is likely more reflective of
the material conditions of the records— summaries in the cases of Virginia and Martinique— than
necessarily an infrequency of such tests. Interestingly, none of these nine cases identified the
substance in question— whether the wiriwiri herbs and “obias” used by Masongoe in 1781 or the
powdered roots Mustapha carried about in a cane in 1787— as a harmful substance after the
investigation. However, two of these cases ended in executions anyway, while Masongoe was
condemned to convict labor at New Fort Amsterdam for life and Mustapha to the painful and
humiliating Spanish Buck. Similarly, while a Virginia court in 1744 investigating the
“Poysonous Powders Roots Herbs and Simples” of an enslaved man named Tom determined that

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133 Ordonnance concernant les nègres et autre personnes empoisonnés, 12 November 1758, ADM Série B, vol. 9, p. 91-92.
134 de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”
135 Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 12 July 1824, La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle, 118; Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 6 December 1824, La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle, 134.
he was not guilty of poisoning with this powder, they decided to transport him from the colony anyway as a potential threat.  

For the two cases that ended in executions, one from Martinique and one from Suriname, the surgeon’s reports did not affect the court’s conviction of the guilt of the accused and did not outweigh other “evidence.” This evidence primarily consisted of the confession extracted on the plantation by a gang of slave owners in the case of Jean Baptiste (1766) and the accusations of other slaves in the case of Coffij and La Rose (1779). Jean Baptiste confessed to attending assemblies of “black poisoners” at the house of Jacques Pain, a free person of color, and that Pain sold Jean Baptiste and others around the island poisons to kill slaves and livestock. A “great quantity of poison” was subsequently found at Jacque Pain’s house. However, after experimenting with these substances on a range of animals “in different fashions and quantities,” the surgeons hired by the court testified that the results were inconclusive. Their testimony was not mentioned again and the court continued to refer to these substances as “poison.” While Jean Baptiste died in jail after testifying, the case expanded based on the names he gave to include thirty additional defendants—twenty-four slaves and six free people of color—and resulted in two executions and twenty-eight other punishments ranging from a branding and whipping to being forced to assist with the burning alive of Jacques Pain.  

In the case of Coffij and La Rose in 1779, a doctor testified that the hair found in the food of their mistress—allegedly sprinkled there to cause death—was “not positively poisonous”; the court decided that it was the intent to poison that mattered and sentenced them to have their right hands cut off, be beheaded, and their heads mounted on display as a warning for others. The act of testing for slaveholders was more important for asserting control over the event than it was for actually proving that the

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137 Trial of Tom (1744), 288.  
138 Procès de Jean Baptiste et autres (1766), 267.  
139 Proces van Coffij en La Rose, 16 August 1779, NADH RVP, vol. 836, p. 216.
substances in question were capable of doing the harm described.

Slaveholders writing on poison in the late eighteenth century frequently included detailed botanical lists of the plants that slaves allegedly used to poison. Knowledge is a form of power: if the poisons allegedly used by people of African descent could be identified as physical substances, than they could be understood, countered, and controled. *Brinvilliers* (*Spigelia anthelminia*), an herb native to the Caribbean that was allegedly used by the Marquise de Brinvilliers to murder her relatives in a sensational 1676 French case, began to appear in discussions of poison by colonial officials in Martinique in the early nineteenth century.\(^\text{140}\) Pierre-Clément de Laussat included *brinvilliers* in his list of poisons used by slaves, claiming that it caused instant and atrocious convulsions in animals; *brinvilliers* also appeared in a list of poisons in a letter from the prosecutor A. Rivière to the governor as part of his campaign to reinstate the Cour Prévôtale.\(^\text{141}\) French-American physician Jean-Baptiste Ricord-Madianna conducted experiments in Martinique in the 1820s—during the peak hysteria of the Cour Prévôtale—in making his own toxicology of the Americas in conversation with European works like Mathieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila’s 1814 *Traité des poissons*.\(^\text{142}\) He explained the history of this common herb, as it was used by the Carib as a vermifuge (a medicine used to destroy parasitic worms) and taught to the English in the seventeenth century; in nineteenth-century Martinique slaves continued to use it in small doses to treat children with worms. For the herb’s connection to the massive poison cases convulsing the island in the 1820s, Ricord-Madianna had

\(^{140}\) For more on the Brinvilliers case, see Mollenauer, *Strange Revelations*, “Chapter 2 Medea and the Marquise: Understanding the Crime of Poison in Seventeenth-Century France.”

\(^{141}\) Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, 13 September 1807, vol. 1, p. 89; Procureur du Roi Rivière to Gouverneur le Comte de Chabrol, 27 July 1827, ANOM Série Géographique: Martinique, box 52, f. 431.

\(^{142}\) Ricord-Madianna at one point corrects Orfila for one of his anecdotes on the *mancenillier* tree (*Hippomane mancinella*). See Jean-Baptiste Ricord-Madianna, *Recherches et experiences sur les poisons d’Amérique tires des trois règnes de la nature* (Bordeaux: Charles Lawalle, 1826), 91; Orfila, *Traité des poisons*, vol. 2.2, p. 76. The copy of Ricord-Madianna’s book I read was signed and sent to the Directeur du Jardin des Plantes de Marseilles, illustrating the circles Ricord-Madianna was trying to enter with this botanical work.
no doubt. He asserted a “fatal passion” held by slaves for poisoning, and included anecdotes of female *gardiennes d’hôpitaux* secretly and spitefully administering these herbs to kill their patients. In fact, he framed his entire work on poison as a call for slave owners to arm themselves with knowledge to better thwart poisoning in a way that was significantly different from the concerns of authors of new toxicologies in Europe: “Planters of the Antilles!…You are surrounded by a thousand poisons and a thousand malefactors, it is true; learn to know the weapons of your enemies.”¹⁴³ For the herb’s prevalence in Ricord-Madianna’s writing—taking up more than fifty pages of his work—it did not appear in any poison cases from the Cour Prévôtale or any earlier cases.

Authors of natural histories of the western Atlantic from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also pointed to the cassava or manioc root (*Manihot esculenta*) as part of the slave poisoner’s arsenal. Cassava does contain small amounts of cyanide and requires careful preparation to be safe to eat.¹⁴⁴ While Europeans had long noted the importance of this preparation and the potential for accidents, it was only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century that they began to list it as a substance used intentionally to poison. In 1774 Long added a description of Amerindians and enslaved Africans incorporating cassava juice into their nefarious poisoning schemes to his standard description of the properties of cassava and its preparation.¹⁴⁵ However, not all works in this period pointed to cassava as a tool for deliberate poisoning. In 1796, Stedman described cassava use, preparation, and poisonous qualities in detail without making claims to its use to intentionally poison—despite discussions elsewhere in his

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work on the “art of poisoning” practiced by both slaves and Amerindians.\textsuperscript{146} By Laussat’s time, in a diary entry listing poisons from 1807 he confidently described it as a “very common poison” when mixed with verdigris.\textsuperscript{147} Laussat, like many others, approached and framed mysterious poisonings in a way that could be understood, through physical properties of plants mixed with a toxic mineral substance for good measure.

While the effort to assert control was persistent, the forms of slaveholder discourse on poison and poisoning cases shifted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The specter of the Haitian Revolution loomed large for slave owners in the early nineteenth century; for some fear of slave uprisings began to alter the way they talked about and conceived of poisonings. This fear was certainly not new, but newly intense after Haiti.\textsuperscript{148} In Martinique, surviving records from Villaret’s wartime special tribunal and the cases, investigation, and correspondence surrounding the 1822 to 1827 Cour Prévôtale reveal a new trope in slaveholders’ ideas about poisoning: the cult of poisoners.\textsuperscript{149} The 1766 case of Jean Baptiste with the alleged meetings of a poisoning society at the house of Jacques Pain was an early example of this idea, but it only became an integral part of slaveholder discourse on poisoning in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{150} An 1807 case at Basse Pointe took a ghoulish turn as forty-two slaves were accused of participation in a poisoning society that involved an initiation ceremony and the making and distributing of poison made from the powdered bones of children taken from the cemetery.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{147} Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, 13 September 1807, vol. 1, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{148} There is extensive literature on the impact of the Haitian revolution on slave societies of the Atlantic world. For relatively recent examples, see Geggus, ed., \textit{The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World}; Ferrer, \textit{Freedom’s Mirror}.
\textsuperscript{149} For more on the Cour Prévôtale, see Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}; and Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror.”
\textsuperscript{150} Procès de Jean Baptiste et outres (1766), 267-275.
\textsuperscript{151} Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, 13 September 1807, vol. 1, p. 83; “Judgement rendu par le tribunal spécial contre des esclaves appartenant aux sieurs Eyma, de Leyritz, Pécul, Chalvet, Fortier, Gradis, Lavener, Serrand, Ducoudray et Valmont accusés d’empoisonnements et de complot d’assassinat contre les économes du
The fixation on initiations and grave digging continued in the hysteria surrounding the 1820s Cour Prévôtale cases. The court explicitly and anxiously discussed the “sect of poisoners” across cases as 368 free and enslaved Africans were caught in the frenzy. The stated purpose of the Cour Prévôtale was to unearth what Governor Donzelot called an alleged “society of poisoners,” well-organized with “chiefs, secret signs, sacramental sermons, [and] a form of initiation.” There may have been a kernel of truth in the idea of secret societies of African poisoners—though not as slave owners in these cases understood it. It was in this period of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that therapeutic healing groups in Bahia began to institutionalize into Candomblé houses; at the same time free and enslaved Africans across the Caribbean created new religious organizations. However, for slaveholders, the idea of a network of sorcerers to plantation society had taken on new heights with the specter of the Haitian Revolution in recent memory.

It was in the context of fears of rebellion as well as rising anti-slavery movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the trope of the “most favored/trusted slave” emerged in slaveholder discourse on poison. Drivers, cooks, and other slaves in relative positions of power and proximity to owners had been accused of poisoning before; what had changed was the increasing conviction of owners that the slaves they trusted the most were the most...
dangerous and the new archetypal poisoners. In fact, in both Peter Kalm’s work from 1770 and Edward Long’s in 1774—Long explicitly leaning on Kalm for this section—the “most favored slave” was instead framed as the individual most likely to be a target of poisoning by jealous fellow slaves. Part of this idea continued to hold in the end of the eighteenth century: Stedman reported hearing the news in 1783 that Joanna, an enslaved woman he had a relationship with, had died, “as some suspected by poison, administered by the jealousy and envy, on account of her prosperity.” While the Jeffersons did not explicitly comment on the possibility of George Sr., George Jr., Jupiter, and Ursula suffering their illnesses as a result of jealous malice, it is significant that as the driver, smith, head cook, and coachman they each occupied positions of relative proximity and power at Monticello.

Intriguingly, the shift in slaveholder discourse about the “most trusted slaves” as poisoners does not neatly map on to data from the poison cases. The following are cases from Martinique and Suriname involving enslaved drivers, who were most often identified for their occupation, as alleged targets vs. alleged perpetrators of poisoning. The absence of drivers from the Virginia country court records is inconclusive, as it may reflect as much paucity in detail as a real difference. Their absence from Bahia cases, however, is interesting as inquisitorial commissioners scrupulously included personal details on the status and occupations denouncers and as much as possible on the accused.

155 For example, in 1745 the Governor of Suriname was shocked by a recent case where the poisoner was one of the slaveholders’ “best and old house slaves,” but he did not claim as later slave owners did that such persons were typical poisoners. See Gouverneur Mauicius to Sociëteit van Suriname, 8 May 1745, NADH SVS, vol. 275, p. 773v.
157 Stedman, *Narrative of a five years’ expedition*, vol. 2, p. 401. For more on the complex relationship between Stedman and Joanna, particularly Stedman’s romanticization of their relationship between his diaries and published work, see Richard and Sally Price’s editorial Introduction to John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revoluted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript*, Richard Price and Sally Prices, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), xxxiii.
158 For more on Jupiter and the Grangers at Monticello, see Stanton, “*Those Who Labor for My Happiness,*” 108-113, 117-122.
While the evidence suggests that drivers may have been more likely to be the alleged targets in the earlier decades than in the nineteenth century, there is a split between Suriname—where all the drivers accused of poisoning were tried between 1731 and 1745—and Martinique with two cases from the 1760s, one from the Villaret tribunal in 1808, and three from the 1830s. Most importantly, the numbers of cases involving drivers as either the target or accused are a small fraction of the total 117 cases for Martinique (<1% and 5% respectively) or 120 cases from Suriname (6% each). Drivers appear to have been perhaps more significant in slaveholder’s imaginary of poisoning than they were in actual cases.

The shift towards suspecting the most trusted slave was most significant in Martinique, especially in the years after the Haitian Revolution. While mid-eighteenth-century cases did not include the trope, writings on poison began to include it in the last quarter of the century.\(^{159}\) Jean de Laborde referenced the idea in his 1775 letter in the context of accusing slaveholders of conducting extrajudicial investigations. He scathingly critiqued them for not being bothered to

\(^{159}\) Oudin-Bastide, *L’effroi et la terreur*, 148, 159.

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**Table 3.2: Poisoning Cases with Enslaved Drivers as Targets vs. Accused, 1725-1849**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Target</th>
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<th>Accused</th>
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<td>S (1722-1825)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1750-74</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1775-99</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1800-24</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1825-49</td>
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*Sources: NADH RVP vol. 783-915; ANOM Série F3 Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, Annales du Conseil souverain de la Martinique, vol. 244-246; ANOM Dépôt des papiers des colonies, greffes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre; ANOM Série C8 Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808); ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale*
find evidence or proof, knowing next to nothing about poison, but instead defaulting to suspect “the most intelligent Blacks…who the master has the most Confidence in.”\textsuperscript{160} Laborde, who believed that poisonings by “nasty, clever…[and] vindictive” slaves were a serious problem, much as he despised the operation of accusations and trials in Martinique, pointed here to slaveholders automatically suspecting slaves in positions of power. However, he did not commit fully to the rhetoric of the most trusted slave. By the Villaret tribunals in the first decade of the nineteenth-century, that rhetoric was firmly in place.\textsuperscript{161} Authors clung to this trope even when their own writing undermined it. In his memoire manuscript, made from copied out passages from his diary rearranged by subject rather than date, Pierre-Clément de Laussat wrote on the sensational case of the enslaved chambermaid Emilie and Madame de La Pagerie. In the same paragraph that he included the detail of La Pagerie’s discovery of her late husband having sex with Emilie he described Emilie after these events as having “all the confidence” of her mistress.\textsuperscript{162} Laussat put Emilie in the trope of the “most trusted slave”, even if it did not match the details he noted about their relationship.

By the establishment of the Cour Prévôtale in 1822, Martinican slaveholders had further elaborated the idea of the “most trusted slave” into a sharp critique of calls for gentler treatment of slaves and anti-slavery movements. A year into the Cour Prévôtale, and at about the same time that Baron Delamardelle was sent by the metropole to investigate the legality of the court, Governor Donzelot wrote to justify the court’s existence. Donzelot asserted that it was “almost always the richest blacks, the best treated by their owners, the domestics enjoying all their

\textsuperscript{160} de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l'Amérique.”
\textsuperscript{161} Louis Thomas Villaret de Joyeuse to Denis Decrès, 15 June 1806, ANOM Série C8a, box 112, f. 219.
\textsuperscript{162} Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, 7 June 1806, vol. 1, 76.
confidence” who were the leaders of poisoning plots. Donzelot went on to make a connection between the “gentleness” of slaves’ treatment in Martinique compared to the British islands—which he claimed did not have a poisoning problem—and further blamed liberal philanthropists for inflaming slaves with their discourse. The idea continued to persist in slaveholders’ letters defending and calling for the reinstatement the court. One letter from 1827 asserted that poison was not the “fruit” of “barbarous treatment” by slaveholders, as “each time” the culprits were the most well treated slaves—the “favorites.”

While the forms of slaveholder discourse on poisoning shifted, the effort to claim control so essential to their dominance in a slave society endured. One growing stream in this effort involved the language of paternalism, as owners framed themselves as protecting slaves against their own medical choices and “superstitions.” The adoption of paternalist discourse was in many ways a response to rising anti-slavery discourse in the Atlantic world, but it was also a continuation of slaveholders’ efforts to police and control black medical practitioners. We can see it in the aftermath of the 1800 Monticello case. After Jupiter and Ursula had died after visiting Sam the “conjuror,” Jefferson created new rules to prevent other slaves from seeking out similar treatments in the future. In the name of protecting his property, he forbade his overseers from hiring black doctors.

A doctor in Martinique for eight years, Étienne Rufz de Lavison researched and

163 Extrait d’une letter de la Martinique de 14 7bre 1823, 14 September 1823, ANOM Séries Géographiques: Martinique, box 52, f. 430.
164 Extrait d’une letter de la Martinique de 14 7bre 1823.
165 Directeur Général de l’intérieur to Gouverneur François Marie Michel de Bouillé, March 1827, ANOM Série Géographiques, box 52, f. 431.
published in 1844 a thorough critique and debunking of Martinican slaveholders’ claims on poisoning. To conduct his work, he collected anecdotes from slave owners and published theories—including those of Ricord-Madianna—and tested them with a series of experiments on animals. He indignantly shared an anecdote he observed in the assizes courts of a local doctor called to testify in an 1842 poisoning case. When a magistrate asked him if slaves possessed any substances capable of producing pulmonary tuberculosis, the doctor replied “As a doctor, I know of no substance which has this property; as a creole, I believe the blacks so wicked, that they are capable of anything!”\(^{167}\) While mainly chastising Martinican slaveholders, Rufz de Lavison also employed the same paternalistic language on the “superstitions” of slaves and palpable contempt for the medical knowledge of slaves. Countering the argument that black medical practitioners had knowledge of plants unknown to Europeans, he claimed with confidence that “There is not a sprig of herb in our fields, in our forests, which is not only known, but classified, drawn, studied, [and] ordered.”\(^{168}\) Even as he critiqued slave owners and their investigations of poisoning, Rufz de Lavison was also contributing to a rhetorical control over poisoning events.

The counterpoint among slaveholders and observers between relegating black medical practitioners to the category of superstition—harmful in its “backwardness” rather than physical effects—and concern about the danger of poisoners was not always smooth. Tensions in authority between slaveholders, colonial officials, and the metropole had long been a part of

\(^{167}\) Rufz de Lavison, *Recherches sur les empoisonnements pratiqués par les nègres à la Martinique,* 6. Rufz de Lavison could have only referred to two possible poisoning cases in the assizes courts from 1842—these were the last two poisoning cases tried in Martinique before emancipation in 1848. The Saint-Pierre court tried enslaved sixty-year-old Léopold (called Lay) and thirty-five-year-old Thetis for performing a cure with a beverage; in the same year the Fort-de-France court tried enslaved twenty-year-old Louise (called Négresse), fourteen-year-old Louisia and fourteen-year-old Avrillette—all domestic slaves—for an attempt on the life of their mistress with arsenic hidden in a medicine. Léopold and Thetis were acquitted and returned to their owner, while Louise, Louisia, and Avrillette were convicted to convict labor for life and prison time. Based on the context, I think Rufz de Lavison must have been referring to the latter case, though neither seem a perfect fit for the anecdote. See Procès de Louise, Louisia, et Avrillette, 24 November 1842, ANOM DPPC Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France, vol. 910, n.p.; Procès de Léopold et Thetis, 13 December 1842, ANOM DPPC Cour d’assises de Saint-Pierre, vol. 922, n.p.

\(^{168}\) Rufz de Lavison, *Recherches sur les empoisonnements,* 33-34.
poisoning events, but in Martinique in the 1820s the efforts of slaveholders to claim control through a “beneficial terror” with the owners running the Cour Prévôtale no longer aligned with the interests of the metropole.\textsuperscript{169} Writing to his mother in France, Pierre Dessalles frequently expressed his frustration that people in the metropole and officials sent from there did not understand the danger slave owners faced from poison wielding slaves. At one point he grumbled, “If it is not the aim of France to protect the colonies, it would be generous for her to let the colonists take care to prevent the wrongs that threaten them.”\textsuperscript{170} In a series of letters attempting to persuade the newly appointed governor to reinstate the Cour Prévôtale, former prosecutor A. Rivièr insisted that poisonings had to be judged differently in Martinique than in France as slaveholders here faced “an organized system of destruction.” Rivièr concluded this 1827 letter with a warning that public opinion was resoundingly negative towards the metropole, as slave owners had come to believe that it did not understand Martinique and their needs.\textsuperscript{171} In another letter, he expressed his frustration that when he had suspected his losses of livestock to be the result of poisoning, the physician performing the autopsy had claimed that there was no indication of such. Rivièr—who was not a doctor—then performed his own autopsy, and claimed to have found “multiple and profound” signs of poison in the intestines—he incorporated this anecdote into a claim for a general clamor among Martinican owners for the return of the Cour Prévôtale when such evidence would have been enough for a prosecution.\textsuperscript{172}

While Rivièr’s efforts were unsuccessful, his letters exude the frustration shared by Dessalles

\textsuperscript{169} The phrase “terreur salutaire” was from a speech by Governor Donzelot to the Conseil du Gouvernement et Administration establishing the Cour Prévôtale in 1822. See Extrait du Registre des Delibérations du Conseil de Gouvernement & d’Administration, 9 August 1822, box 52, f. 430.

\textsuperscript{170} Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 8 September 1822, \textit{La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle}, 69. This letter was attached to Dessalles’ letter from 1 September 1822.

\textsuperscript{171} Procureur du Roi Rivièr to Gouverneur le Comte de Chabrol (1827).

\textsuperscript{172} Procureur du Roi Rivièr to Gouverneur Louis Henri de Saulces de Freycinet, 15 October 1829, ANOM Séries Géographiques: Martinique, box 52, f. 431. Caroline Oudin-Bastide also talks about Rivièr’s letters, see Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}, 81-82.
and others with the metropole’s check on slaveholders’ ability to exert power and control over their slaves.

Tensions in Martinique came to a head in 1846 and 1847 with the trial of slave owner Joseph Havre for imprisoning three slaves—the driver Jean-Baptiste, the hospital head Angèle, and the chief refiner Elie—in an attic for three years on suspicion of poisoning. Havre was hardly the first slaveholder tried for abusing slaves he suspected of poisoning: a century earlier in Suriname white manager Benjamin Pousset was tried for torturing and murdering an enslaved woman he suspected of being a poisoner. However, the context of Havre’s case in the years just preceding emancipation was unique. By the time the royal prosecutor found out about Havre’s actions, by means of an anonymous tip, Elie had died of dysentery and Jean-Baptiste and Angèle could no longer walk. At heart this case was about slaveholders’ efforts to assert control over poisoning, conceived as a profound loss of control. The prosecution’s case rested on the legal limits of slave owners’ authority to imprison their slaves, as well as the lack of concrete proof that there was actually poisoning. The defense’s case, which was ultimately successful with a jury of slave owners, was that Havre did what was necessary to counter the very real and dangerous threat of poisoning on his plantation.

According to Havre’s testimony at his trial in Saint-Pierre, from 1840 to 1842 eighteen slaves and numerous mules and horses had died on the plantation. The whole plantation said that the deaths were caused by poison, confirmed for Havre by the autopsy of a woman who had a suspiciously quick death, and pointed to Jean-Baptiste as the poisoner. Elie, the refiner,

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173 Most of the details in this case come from a furious letter from the general prosecutor to the governor after Havre’s acquittal. The prosecutor enclosed the transcript of the case, printed across three issues of the Courrier de la Martinique from April 1847, complete with the prosecutor’s marginalia. It is a remarkable source, and one worthy of greater study. See Procureur Général to Gouverneur Pierre Louis Aimé Mathieu, 12 April 1847, ANOM Séries Géographiques: Martinique, box 33, f. 284. This folder also contains a flurry of official correspondence regarding the case. Caroline Oudin-Bastide briefly mentions this case, see Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 106-107.

contributed to calls to arrest Jean-Baptiste by claiming that he had caused the sugar to go bad in addition to poisoning several enslaved women. Once arrested and interrogated by Havre, Jean Baptiste allegedly claimed that he, Angèle, and Elie had been poisoners together; Havre’s suspicious of Angèle were apparently confirmed the next day when some water she gave to him tasted strange. The defense pointed to the fact that the “epidemic” of illnesses had stopped “as if by enchantment” after his actions as justification for them.\textsuperscript{175} Several white witnesses from Grand-Anse, including the abbé Jacquier, testified that everyone in the neighborhood knew about the poisonings at Havre’s plantation and the measures he took to stop them. The mayor of Grand-Anse gave a vigorous defense of Havre’s actions, ascribing a motive to Jean-Baptiste as seeking vengeance for a loss of power in the transfer of the plantation from M. Clauset to his son-in-law Havre. He also rebuffed the prosecutors’ push for scientific proof of poison by claiming that poisons are very difficult to detect, citing cases from the 1820s Cour Prévôtale. Havre’s uncle continued this line of reasoning by arguing that since the government would not act without proof that was impossible to obtain, slaveholders sometimes must take the law into their own hands.

After the acquittal, the prosecutor complained that this result exposed problems with the “creole character,” and that men of “weak spirit” who believe in poison in the face of evidence because “all the world around [them] professes this belief” will continue to acquit their peers.\textsuperscript{176} Despite the outcome of the case, there were several consequences for Havre. At the prosecutor’s advice, the governor concluded that it would not be safe for Jean-Baptiste and Angèle to return to Havre, forcing him to sell them to a temporary guardian. They were soon freed, and the prosecutor also made a point in February 1848—only a few months before the abolition of

\textsuperscript{175} Procureur Général to Gouverneur Pierre Louis Aimé Mathieu, 12 April 1847.\textsuperscript{176} Procureur Général to Gouverneur Pierre Louis Aimé Mathieu, 9 April 1847, ANOM Séries Géographiques: Martinique, box 33, f. 284.
slavery in the French empire—to inform the new governor of “this important case.”

The Joseph Havre case illustrates well both the tenacity of slaveholders’ concern with control in poisoning cases and the tensions over their ability to assert control over the concept of poison. Havre and the slave owners who defended him made claims to knowledge on poison that trumped standards of proof. The confrontation with alternative sources of authority was extreme in the context of a trial, but the idea of the primacy of slaveholder knowledge and experience, their “common knowledge” of poisoning cases, was widely spread and persistent in the slave societies of the western Atlantic. Havre’s actions shared a connection with Thomas Mann Randolph’s efforts to understand the ‘unstringing’ effects of the conjuror’s poison in 1800, the Sociëteit van Suriname’s 1749 ordinance on taming practices, and Pedro de Sesquira Barbosa making money off of Branca’s *calundús* in 1701. Whether sanctioning, studying, or suppressing black medical practitioners, slaveholders worked constantly to assert a control that never fully existed.

As for the 1800 case at Monticello, the flight of Perkins’ Sam to parts unknown left the case unresolved. Thomas Jefferson, Martha Jefferson Randolph, and Thomas Mann Randolph discussed their theories, making the events that resulted in the deaths of Jupiter, Ursula, and the Georges comprehensible to themselves, then moved on. While the conjuror and his alleged victims gradually disappeared from their correspondence, the poisoning event briefly revealed both a tear in the slaveholders’ control over the medical activities of their slaves and the careful effort they undertook to stitch their conceived control together again.

The perspective of slave owners is important for understanding ideas about poison,

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177 Procureur Général to Gouverneur Claude Rostoland, 21 February 1848, ANOM Séries Géographiques: Martinique, box 33, f. 284.
medicine, and sorcery and the prosecution of poisoning cases in the western Atlantic, but alone it offers an incomplete story. Much of the meaning and relationships revealed in these cases were outside the limits of their understanding. It is necessary to explore the perspectives of enslaved communities and the black medical practitioners so frequently accused by slaveholders and slaves of poisoning to form a more complete appreciation of how these ideas interacted and transformed.
Swart Jan was an enslaved black driver at Plantagie Jagtlust, a large coffee plantation of 2,000 acres almost directly across the Suriname River from the capital of Paramaribo. The morning of June 18th, 1744, he and his wife, a “Coromantee” named Griet, ran east into the woods. Earlier that morning, an enslaved man named Quamina had led a group from the quarters to the main house to speak with Gerrit Versteegh, the manager and overseer of the plantation. They accused Swart Jan of being a “Wijsman”—wissiman, a poisoner-sorcerer—and he and his wife of “going about” with vergift (poison). Their testimony, later read before the Suriname Court of Policy and Criminal Justice, revealed that they suspected the pair as the cause of a series of illnesses and deaths in the neighborhood. Among the specific accusations, one man named Leveilje claimed that Swart Jan had recently given him a bitter “soopje” (dram or broth), after which he had felt a heavy pain in his body, fallen to the ground, and was “touched” with swelling—interpreted as clear evidence of poisoning. The crowd also told Versteegh that the recently deceased Quassiba, who was “also a doctress,” had predicted her death by poisoning and claimed that Swart Jan would be responsible. One slave claimed to have seen Swart Jan later taking dirt from Quassiba’s grave, further evidence of his alleged sorcery. Other accusations were not restricted to Jagtlust, but came from slaves from the neighboring plantations Peperpot.

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1 “Swart Jan” (Black John) was how this man referred to himself when asked by the court to state his name during his examination. Accordingly, I will refer to him as such. For information on the plantation and its geographic location, see Alexander de Lavaux, “Allemeene kaart van de Colonie of Provintie van Suriname,” 1737, Bijzondere Collecties van de Universiteit van Amsterdam.


3 On wissim, see Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 956; Stedman, Narrative of a five years’ expedition (1796), vol. 2, p.266-267. Accusations of wisi as a practice among the Saramaka maroons, as described by Moravian missionaries in the 1770s, also had multiple interpretations: missionaries identified the practices as “poison,” while the maroons termed it “sorcery.” See Price, Alabi’s World, 159.
Meersorgh and Mopentibo. Slaves at Peperpot told their overseers that they had seen Swart Jan moving between the plantations, collecting *wiriwiri* (leaves from magical plants) and threatening people.⁴

The investigation against Swart Jan and Griet began the night before, when Quamina and other slaves searched Swart Jan’s cabin. They found a pot of what they termed “poison”; they then beat Swart Jan and locked him in irons. Swart Jan protested that the pot contained a pain medicine that he had not only administered to others, but had also taken himself many times, and was not *vergift* (poison). The crowd ignored him. Versteegh was not involved in this initial investigation conducted by the slaves; the first he heard of it was in the early morning hours of the day Swart Jan and Griet ran away. After hearing Quamina and the others, Versteegh had Swart Jan brought before him, and asked if he had poisoned whites and slaves. Allegedly, he said yes—though he would later consistently and vehemently deny this affirmation during his trial. Soon after Swart Jan’s meeting with Versteegh, Griet helped her husband break free, and the couple ran. Three days later, a group of four Jagtlust slaves recaptured Swart Jan in a nearby meadow, wounded and with no sign of Griet. Brought again to the overseer Versteegh, Swart Jan told him that Griet had hanged herself in the woods and that he had struck himself with a knife, wanting to die. When later asked by the court why they had ran, Swart Jan replied that they had been afraid following the slaves’ accusation of poisoning. Before Versteegh took Swart Jan to the court in Paramaribo across the river, the slaves of Jagtlust, with Versteegh’s knowledge, invited an enslaved man named Maskree to come to the plantation. Bearing a calabash and a sheep’s horn, Maskree spoke to the slaves and to Swart Jan. It is unclear from Versteegh’s report

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exactly what happened next, but later that day Versteegh sent Swart Jan across the water to the cells of Fort Zelandia. Maskree and the other slaves watched him leave.\(^5\)

Swart Jan’s case is significant in its own right as a microcosm of the tensions and fraught relationships between slaves, slaveholders, and practitioners; it is also illustrative the ways these relationships across the western Atlantic were entangled with poison, medicine, and sorcery. The slaves who investigated and locked up Swart Jan accused him of being a wissiman: of using magical medical powers to “poison” rather than to cure. In conducting their investigation, they made a choice to involve both the white overseer and an enslaved medical practitioner from another plantation. Slaves both sought their own medical care—often from black medical practitioners and sometimes in defiance of the law—and actively instigated some poison investigations against these same healers. The policing of medical practitioners of African descent was not only practiced by slave owners, who were deeply concerned with maintaining control over slaves, but also by communities of the enslaved themselves as part of their struggle to manage their therapeutic processes.\(^6\) Using this case and others from the slave societies of the western Atlantic, I argue that poison accusations and medical care among the enslaved need to be considered together in order to understand healing as a community event that was deeply entwined with overlapping systems of justice.

This chapter will examine the roles of enslaved communities in the policing and patronage of black medical practitioners: as clients, witnesses, patients, and accusers. The same people could have different roles in a poisoning case, each reflecting different aspects of their relationships with each other, with slaveholders, and with practitioners. In the case of Swart Jan,

\(^5\) Proces van Swart Jan, 10 December 1744, Nationaal Archief (NADH), Raad van Politie (RVP) vol. 797, n.p. The upper corners of this and several other volumes in the collection have been damaged by water, eliminating page numbers.

\(^6\) Janzen, “Therapy Management,” 76.
Leveilje was first Swart Jan’s client, taking the “soopje” from him, before being struck with affliction and becoming one of his accusers. The slaves who took their denunciations to slaveholders and through them the colonial court systems often did so as a community, framing themselves as seeking justice for perceived wrongdoing against the afflicted and their relatives. The relationships embedded in the above roles were not unique to the enslaved; free people of color also had participated along similar lines in some cases, especially in Bahia, and there is evidence that maroon communities conducted similar investigations of poisoning cases. However, in the slave societies of the western Atlantic, slaves were in a uniquely vulnerable position of having to negotiate medical care and concerns about practitioners with slaveholders or risk potentially severe punishment.

Existing studies of poison cases primarily discuss alleged poisonings by slaves as acts of resistance taken against slave owners—poison being a ‘weapon of the weak’ and a tool of revenge. This scholarship has done important work in identifying the significance of poison cases to slaveholder discourses on slavery and connections between poison and fears of rebellion. In these works, accusations of poison, obeah, feitiçaria, etc. with enslaved targets are often framed as “anomalous behavior”—a deflection of aggression from whites. However, frameworks of resistance obscure the fact that a significant portion—in some cases the majority—of poison cases from Suriname, Bahia, Martinique, and Virginia in the mid-eighteenth

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7 See Price, Alabi’s World, 159-162 for a description of a trial and execution for “wisi” among the Saramacca Maroons in 1777.
8 For example, see Schwarz, Twice Condemned; Fick, The Making of Haiti; Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”; Voeks, Sacred Leaves of Candomblé; Harding, A Refuge in Thunder; Moitt, Women and Slavery in the French Antilles; Chambers, Murder at Montpelier; Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries. Some other works on poison focus mainly or exclusively on the discourse and interpretations of poison by white slaveholders and the law. For example: Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror”; Handler and Bilby, Enacting Power; Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur; Paton, The Cultural Politics of Obeah. For works that address slave-led investigations into poisonings in detail, see Fett, Working Cures; Sweet, Recreating Africa; Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners”; Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah”; Bryson, “The Art of Power.”
9 Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 104.
century involved enslaved targets. These proportions suggest that alleged poisonings and accusations had as much if not more to do with relationships among slaves as between slaves and slaveholders.

By paying close attention to afflicted slaves in the wider communities connected to poisoning cases, this chapter also draws on an important turn in the history of medicine towards the underexplored perspective of patients. Patients, practitioners, and members of communities construct meanings of an illness together through a process of medical mediation; it is through the interaction of people over specific medical events that ideas and social norms regarding medicine are created. Works by scholars of African medical history also highlight the significance of relatives and community members—living and dead—in poison cases as medical events. In the context of slavery in the western Atlantic, the importance of relationships and the communication and negotiation of ideas about medicine between people holds. The medical practitioners of African descent who were both frequently among the accused and a major part of the treatment of malevolent afflictions were important. Likewise, on plantations the relationship between patient and practitioner was greatly complicated by the conditions of slavery and the imperative for slave owners to try and maintain control over their property. But by focusing solely on owners and practitioners—often the accuser and defendant in poison trials—we miss

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10 Roy Porter was the most influential historian in this turn towards patients. See Porter, “The Patient’s View”; Porter, The Greatest Benefit to Mankind.
11 Willem de Blécourt and Corneile Usborne, “Medicine, Mediation and Meaning,” in Cultural Approaches to the History of Medicine: Mediating Medicine in Early Modern and Modern Europe, Willem de Blécourt and Corneile Usborne, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 1-10. Willem de Blécourt has also been a participant in a turn in the history of European witchcraft to examine witch beliefs into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt, eds., Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2004).
12 For a seminal work on African medical history, see Feierman and Janzen, eds. The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa. For more specific monographs, see Janzen, Lembha, 1650-1930; Janzen, Ngoma; Kodesh, Beyond the Royal Gaze.
13 For two works that explore these medical connections in the nineteenth-century US South and the seventeenth-century Spanish Caribbean, see Fett, Working Cures; Gómez, Experiential Caribbean. Todd Lee Savitt’s pioneering work has also had a major influence on the history of medicine and slavery in the Americas. See Savitt, Medicine and Slavery.
the experiences and concerns of many enslaved people who sought out practitioners’ services as clients, who suffered from strange swellings and fits of affliction, and who sometimes levied poison accusations themselves.

It would be misleading to imply that slaves initiated most or even a majority of poison cases, and the balance of power between slaveholders and slaves in these accusations should not be forgotten. There were many cases where slaves on plantations were anything but instigators or willing participants in poison investigations. For example, in a well-known case a year before the events on Jagtlust plantation, a white overseer named Benjamin Pousset at the Sinabo sugar plantation was tried for accusing and personally whipping, torturing, and beheading an enslaved woman he believed to be a poisoner over the objections and pleas of the Sinabo slaves forced to watch. A similar incident occurred on Pierre Dessalles’ plantation in Martinique in 1824 and 1825, when he reduced rations, set curfews, separated men and women, increased beatings, and instituted random jailing until the slaves produced a culprit responsible for the series of deaths among livestock.\footnote{Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 967-968; Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”, 244-247. Pierre Dessales to Albis de Gissac, 12 July 1824, 28 July 1824, 15 September 1824, 6 November 1824, 6 December 1824, 1 February 1825 in Pierre Dessales, La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle: Correspondance 1808-1834, ed. Fenri de Fremont (La Haye du Puits: Imprimerie Cauchard, 1980), 119-121, 123-125, 127-128, 132, 134-135, 140.} However, as Natalie Zemon Davis has argued for Suriname, internal systems of slave justice coexisted with the plantation rule of slaveholders and the criminal justice of the colonial government.\footnote{Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 953, 971.} Cases like that of Swart Jan and the slaves of Jaglust plantation highlight the ways in which illnesses, poison, and public healings were connected.\footnote{Fett, Working Cures, 40; James H. Sweet, Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 70-71.} In other words, therapeutic management conducted by slaves and accusations of poisoning that often targeted black medical practitioners were two sides of the same coin.
Slaves on plantations from Virginia to Brazil pushed against the varying limitations of their circumstances to take charge of their own health care. They frequently took the risk of punishment and potential execution to seek treatment from black medical practitioners outside of slaveholder sanction and, frequently, beyond the borders of their plantations. Such was the case of an enslaved porter, Jan, who at his trial for running away in 1762 gave the explanation that he was sick and had ran to the maroons for treatment. Several trials of medical practitioners of African descent, including Kwamina in 1763 and Scaramouche in 1765, included accusations from slaveholders of their medical treatment of slaves who came to them from other plantations. In the case of the latter, the practitioner was convicted of selling vergift (poison) and “superstitions” to an entire group of slaves on another plantation for protection against illnesses. From the 1740s, Virginia, Suriname, Martinique, and Bahia each had laws and local ordinances forbidding or severely restricting sanctioned medical practice by people of African descent; the fact that slaves continued to seek their services speaks volumes to the tenacity of their struggle to manage their own medical choices.
With the imbalance of power in the plantation world between owners and slaves, afflicted individuals who desired the services of black practitioners often found it less risky to negotiate care, when possible, within the system of slaveholder sanction. In Virginia, this system of sanction was codified: after 1748, it was only legal for a slave to practice medicine if all slave owners involved gave their knowledge and consent.\(^\text{21}\) When Robert Carter wrote to nearby slaveholders requesting the services of their enslaved practitioners, he identified these requests to cure fits and unusual ailments as specifically coming from the afflicted, or from other slaves on their behalf.\(^\text{22}\) A remarkable pass R. Carter wrote for Sampson in 1788 both framed the illness as an unsolved mystery and emphasized Sampson’s request to seek medical care:

> To any Person whom it may concern, The Bearer Sampson the Property of the subscriber has for some time been declining, but the subscriber does not undertake to Assign any cause for Sampson’s decline. The subscriber doth at the request of Sampson, permit him to make enquiry for some Person who has skill in the Practice of Medicine and put himself under his care to perform a Cure—Whoevever may engage therin the subscriber expects that said Person will advise him of the Terms.\(^\text{23}\)

Sampson managed to secure an unusually flexible arrangement, but he shared the basic strategy of negotiation with many slaves in the western Atlantic who wished to see black practitioners without risking punishment. To obtain a degree of protection, some slaves conducted communal rituals of healing with the knowledge, consent, and sometimes the monetary profit of slaveholders. For example, slaves who participated in the *calundús* (ritual healing dances) on the Bahian plantation of Pedro de Sesqueira Barbosa could do so at a reduced risk—accusations,

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\(^{21}\) Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, vol. 4 p. 104-112.

\(^{22}\) Robert Carter to Bennett Neal, 15 Sep 1781, Carter Letterbook IV, 117-119; Robert Carter to William Berry, 31 July 1786, Carter Letterbook VII, 62; Robert Carter to William Berry, 26 Feb 1788, Carter Letterbook VIII, 88.

\(^{23}\) Robert Carter Pass to Sampson, 31 Jan 1788, Carter Letterbook VIII, 77.
when they came, were not from the slaveholders sanctioning these practices, but from neighbors.24

Friends and relatives of afflicted slaves were prominent advocates for their care and were often the parties who negotiated treatment with slave owners and practitioners. In one of Virginia slaveholder Landon Carter’s recurring confrontations in the 1770s with a middle-aged woman named Betty, he noted with frustration, “She has been her own doctor and now I have taken her in hand she will not do as I direct…indeed she has too much encouragement from within doors to be thus obstinate.”25 In the contemporary letters of Robert Carter, slaves trying to take an active role in the care of their relatives and friends were prominent. For example, in the case of a woman named Suckey afflicted with fits, it was “Negro Michael” who suggested R. Carter seek out the services of “Black Hannah”; in the case of Katty, who was “subject to fits so as to deprive her of her Speech,” it was Katty’s mother who negotiated the assistance of “Negro David Doct.”26 The relatives of those believed to have been afflicted with feitiços in Bahia likewise organized to pay medical practitioners to conduct calûndu divinations and had an important participatory role in the dance.27 In the 1704 denunciation of Mai Caterina, a well-known enslaved feiticeira living in Salvador, her accuser described how free and enslaved people from all over the city brought their children to her for her to “bless” with protection and perform cures of malevolent illnesses.28 While enslaved parents and relatives had drastically limited control over their kin, sources like these show some of the ways they did their best to negotiate and seek out both preventative care and medical treatment for them.

24 Denúncia de Branca e Pedro de Sesqueira Barbosa, 14 August 1701, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 81, p. 239-248.
27 For example, see Denúncia de Pedro Coelho Pimentel, 28 March 1686, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 59, p. 135.
28 Denúncia de Mai Catherina, 12 May 1704, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 76, p. 11-12.
Poisoning ranked highly among the health concerns of afflicted slaves and their friends and relatives, and a significant number of alleged poisonings had enslaved targets. Between ten and sixty percent of poisoning cases had enslaved targets; when reckoned as a proportion of cases with any target—given that there were many cases with no stated target at all—those numbers jump.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Total Cases with Target</th>
<th>Total Cases with Enslaved Target (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B (1680-1839)</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>*12 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S (1722-1825)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>71 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA (1706-1784)</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>46 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA2 (1740-1840)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (1730-1848)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>56 (56%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Poison Cases with Enslaved Targets, 1680-1849

Note: B = Bahia (full processos and cadernos), S = Suriname, VA = Virginia from Philip Schwarz’s data, VA2 = Virginia Cumberland and Brunswick Counties, M = Martinique. Cases with enslaved targets could also have other targets (e.g. whites, livestock, etc). For Martinique, I have combine data from four different courts to make this table; the date range does not include date for each year (gaps: 1775-1802, 1810-21, 1827-29). For Bahia, while the surviving police devassas extend from 1751 through the end of my period, the vast majority range from 1810-39. For Suriname, the volumes from the following years have not survived: 1724-26, 1729, 1746, 1748, 1751, 1755-60, 1794-97, 1800, 1805, 1810, and 1814-20.

* Three of these cases involved suicide by means of consuming arsenic, each from the 1820s in Cachoeira.

Source: ANTT IL Series 28 and Series 30, vol. 55-131; NADH RVP vol. 783-915; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, Table 10 p. 96; LVA Brunswick CCOB vol. 1-36; LVA Cumberland CCOB vol. 1749-51 to 1844-51; ANOM Série F3 Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, Annales du Conseil souverain de la Martinique, vol. 244-246; ANOM Dépôt des papiers des colonies, greffes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre; ANOM Série C8 Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808); ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale. Schwarz’s analysis of Virginia slave crimes runs 1706 to 1784, but the first poison cases did not appear until 1730.

It is not that cases targeting whites were insignificant, especially considering that they were a small proportion of the population in Martinique, Bahia, and Suriname. However, the numbers in this table are remarkable considering both the context of trials where slaves could not—with the exception of Inquisitorial denunciations—bring cases themselves and the historiographical focus on cases of slaves accused of poisoning whites. Slaves were frequently represented in cases
where a person was accused of poisoning a specific target. The number of alleged enslaved targets demands further analysis—who were these slaves, alive or dead, who identified themselves or were identified as victims of poisoning? What can we know about them?

Unfortunately, a demographic analysis of the trials alone yields limited information, as for many of the cases the targets were identified vaguely with terms like “many slaves.” I pulled out and analyzed targets who were specifically identified, either by name or some other individual marker (e.g. “le negre commandeur”)—unfortunately, I did not have enough such information from the Bahia or Virginia cases to conduct a clear analysis. The trial records from Suriname and Martinique were more obliging, at least for being able to identify individuals by gender.

Table 4.2: Named Individuals as Targets in Poison Cases, 1730-1849

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Suriname (1730-1825)</th>
<th>Martinique (1730-1848)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Slaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1730-39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740-49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750-59</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760-69</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770-79</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-89</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790-99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-09</td>
<td>†</td>
<td>†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810-19</td>
<td>†</td>
<td>†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820-29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830-39</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840-49</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Most of the Suriname RVP volumes from the 1750s are missing.
** All 65 named individual slaves were listed as targets in a single case across ten plantations from 1807.
† Trial records do exist for these decades, but I have not yet conducted research with them.
Source: NADH RVP vol. 783-915; ANOM Série F3 vol. 244-246; ANOM DPPC, greffes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre; ANOM Série C8 (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808)
Taken as a whole, enslaved men were named more often as targets than enslaved women, with the gender gap wider in Suriname than in Martinique. Broken down by decade, the pattern of a greater proportion of named enslaved men over enslaved women held, even after women had become a majority in the enslaved population of Martinique by 1803. While limited, and not representative of all cases, this analysis of identified individuals suggests that enslaved men were more often the alleged targets of poisoning of enslaved women—sometimes dramatically so.

There are a few possible explanations for this gender gap. A not insignificant gap between enslaved men and women in these colonies in the eighteenth century could account for some, but not all, of the discrepancy. Enslaved men generally had more opportunities to be in positions with greater occupational mobility—perhaps widening both their contacts and potential sources of social conflict. It is difficult to test this hypothesis, as cases rarely listed the occupation of enslaved targets. Drivers, exclusively male, were the exception to this rule; I found eight such cases identifying the driver as the target, all but one from Suriname. There also may have been more cases of alleged poisonings of women that did not make it into the court system, perhaps reflecting a greater concern on the part of slaveholders towards the loss or “damage” to enslaved men as their property. As the quantitative data offers limited analysis on enslaved targets, I also turn to the qualitative details of cases to try to better understand them.

29 État Général du recensement de l’île Martinique (1803). This ratio held steady, as women made up 52% of the enslaved population in 1835. Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et la terreur, 165.
30 Rudi Otto Beeldsnijder’s work on mid-eighteenth-century Suriname plantations shows a gender ratio of 58% males (men and boys) to 42% females (women and girls) in the enslaved populations of about twenty plantations. See “om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”, 259. Censuses from Martinique had the following ratios of enslaved men to women: 52% to 48% in 1762; 51% to 49% in 1789; and 45% to 55% in 1803. As mentioned above, by the nineteenth century women made up a majority of the enslaved population. See Governor William Rufane, Martinique, to Egremont transmitting ‘recensement’ of 1762, 19 July 1762, NA-Kew CO 166 Secretary of State for the Colonies and War and Colonial Department: Martinique, Original Orressondence, Military and Naval, box 2, f. 41; Recensement Général de la Colonie de La Martinique pour la population et la Culture pendant l’année 1789, 3 September 1789, NA-Kew, War Office Papers, West Indies and South America, box 32; État Général du recensement de l’île Martinique, 1803, ANOM DPPC Greffes Martinique, box 507.
The symptoms of the afflicted slaves appear in some of the more descriptive court cases and in plantation papers, with several recurring themes across locations and time. Unfortunately, of the 132 total poison trials/investigations in my entire dataset from 1680 to 1850 with slaves as targets, only thirty-four (26%) described the symptoms of the afflicted in sufficient detail; the rest used general terms, mainly variations on “sick” and “ill.” As a recurring word of caution, documents from different counts contained differing degrees of detail, with cases from Suriname most likely to include details of symptoms and cases from Virginia the least. However, by combining information from these trials with more anecdotal evidence from plantation papers and official correspondence, common symptoms among the slaves believed to be afflicted with poison stand out. Illnesses that the afflicted most commonly attributed to poison usually included one or more of the following: long declines, sudden attacks of “fits” or collapsing, stomach pains, and illnesses with swellings of the body. Often these symptoms were combined. For example, in the 1778 case of Thereza and Luis in the Bahian sertão, their alleged “malefícios” caused their victims, both slaveholders and slaves, to slowly lose all of their color, strength, and health before dying with identical swollen bellies. I will analyze each symptom individually.

Belly pains appeared in eight cases, and were common enough in Martinique poisonings that slaveholders there cited mal d’estomac as both a key symptom of poisoning and a scourge that almost exclusively affected people of African descent. The effects of these stomach pains could be devastating: more than thirty slaves on M. Aurenae’s plantation—the entire enslaved

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32 The breakdown of specific symptoms for these thirty-four trials is as follows: swelling (16), belly pains (8), long decline (6), sudden death (4), collapse (4), vomit (3), insanity (2), convulsions (1), hair falling out (1), general weakness (1). There is overlap, as several cases involved multiple stated symptoms.


34 Jean de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique,” 1775, ANOM Série C8b, box 14, folder 4; Dessalles, La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle, 85, 181; Étienne Rufz de Lavison, Recherches sur les empoisonnements pratiqués par les nègres à la Martinique (Paris: Chez J. B. Ballière, 1844), 5. Laborde and Rufz de Lavison were both skeptics of poisoning claims, arguing for other possible causes of mal d’estomac than poisoning.
population but one—died from it in less than a year.\textsuperscript{35} In several cases before the eighteenth-century Suriname courts, afflicted slaves identified stomach pains with poisoning. For example, slaves who gave their testimony against Swart Jan to the overseer Versteeg in 1744 described receiving “heavy pain in the belly” from him.\textsuperscript{36}

Seizures and “collapses” combined appeared in another five cases. After going to Assurant, known as a medical practitioner, for a medicinal dram one morning in 1737, Isaac collapsed while working. About forty other slaves on Plantagie Rosenberg later helped take Isaac inside and bled him. As he lay in bed, possibly dying, Isaac accused Assurant of poisoning him, an opinion that nearly the whole slave quarter shared as many had been sick on the plantation and three of their number had recently died from their afflictions.\textsuperscript{37} “Unnatural” fainting also triggered poison investigations on Plantagie Nieuw Klaarenbeek in 1741 and Plantagie Mamere in 1771.\textsuperscript{38} Quamina in 1788 not only collapsed, but was afflicted by “violent fits” for several days after his alleged poisoning by Goliath and Coridon.\textsuperscript{39} Several cases of convulsive fits striking slaves appeared in the papers of Virginia slaveholders. Mary, a young enslaved woman on Landon Carter’s plantation in the 1770s, described the sensation of something running up her arms and legs to her head before collapsing into fits. Carter noted that she and her siblings had each wept over “a trifling belly ache” before, and that “any little complaint fills them with the Apprehensions of death.”\textsuperscript{40} After seeing a “conjuror” in Buckingham County and taking his

\textsuperscript{35} de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”
\textsuperscript{36} Proces van Swart Jan, n.p.
\textsuperscript{37} Proces van Assurant, 27 May 1737, NADH RVP vol. 791, p. 72-75.
\textsuperscript{38} Proces van Adam, 29 July 1741, NADH RVP vol. 794, n.p.; Proces van Pandie, 18 February 1771, NADH RVP vol. 819, p. 41-46v.
\textsuperscript{39} Proces van Goliath en Coridon, 15 July 1788, NADH RVP vol. 851, p. 32-34v.
medicine during a 1800 Monticello poisoning event, a man named Jupiter suffered a “convulsion fit” that lasted for over ten hours and required three “stout men” to hold him down.\footnote{Martha Jefferson Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 30 January 1800.}

Long declines ranging from weeks to years were also not uncommon as a symptom. In the only case from the Virginia country court records I found that included detailed symptoms, an unfortunate enslaved man named Joe drank a mix of “Powders Roots Herbs and Simples” from Tom, an enslaved medical practitioner. As a result, he “grievously Languish[ed] for several weeks before he, being ”so Mortally Poysened,” died.\footnote{Trial of Tom, 9 June 1744, LVA Caroline CCOB, 1741-46 vol. 2, p. 288-290.} Lingering illnesses were among the many accusations brought to the doorstep of free medical practitioners Paulo Gomes and Ignacia of 1749 Salvador.\footnote{Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 21 October 1749, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 109, p. 153-160.} In one of the early Suriname cases, Samson suffered for three months before his death, afflicted with stomach pain, swelling, and a great weakness that prevented him from working.\footnote{Proces van Mainbij en La Lande, 31 January 1732, NADH RVP vol. 787, n.p.} The illnesses of George and Ursula at Monticello from 1798 to 1800 were also examples of such lingering afflictions.

Slaves across the western Atlantic referenced swelling more than any other specific symptom as an indication of poisoning, doing so in sixteen out of the above thirty-four cases. While various physical objects found in investigations of poisoning were wielded as proof against the accused, suspicious swelling was often the first indication that poison was afoot and the spark of a poison investigation. The slaves who gave their testimony against Swart Jan cited swelling, specifically of the belly, that in one instance caused a man to collapse, as a powerful indication of poisoning.\footnote{Proces van Swart Jan, n.p.} In his 1739 testimony against Coffie, a fellow slave from the same Suriname plantation, Dosoe described how two slaves swelled up before dying a few days later. In the ensuing investigation a jawbone was found—it is unclear from the testimony by whom—
buried in the ground under the hut of the afflicted and linked to Coffie, evidence that led to his conviction and burning at the stake in Paramaribo.\textsuperscript{46} The significance of swelling as a sign of poisoning appeared in even earlier cases, such as the alleged poisoning by Manoel Petécaba of three fellow slaves in 1699 Bahia, who suddenly began to swell all over, dying several months later.\textsuperscript{47} In plantation papers from early nineteenth-century Virginia and Martinique, strange swellings were a sign that something was seriously amiss. Such was the case with the “extraordinary swelling” of Agalé that preceded a poison investigation on Pierre Dessalles plantation in 1822, or the swelling that began in Ursula’s legs and spread to her whole body at Monticello in 1800.\textsuperscript{48}

Notably, convulsions and swelling were also frequently noted symptoms of the bite of greatly feared venomous snakes in the Caribbean, particularly the fer-de-lance (used to refer to at least two species of viper, including Bothrops asper on the mainland Caribbean and Bothrops lanceolatus endemic specifically to the island of Martinique). Both species were extremely dangerous, as they lived in lowland areas and came in frequent contact with humans—especially in the cane fields. Pierre-Clément de Laussat witnessed the deadly effect of such a snakebite on a young enslaved woman who “died in torment with convulsions, flailing, [and] contractions,” going on to tally twenty-three deaths of slaves in Sainte-Marie in 1802 alone from fer-de-lance.\textsuperscript{49} John Gabriel Stedman described a similar gruesome scene involving an unfortunate enslaved

\textsuperscript{46} Proces van Coffie, 20 April 1739, NADH RVP vol. 793, p. 56-56v.
\textsuperscript{47} Processo de Gracia, 1699, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 12658. The trial was of a black medical practitioner named Gracia for being a curandeira and performing divination ceremonies; the allegation against Patécaba came up during the inquisitorial commissioner’s initial open ended interviews with neighbors and people surrounding Gracia’s case—the Inquisition declined to pursue it any further and it did not go to trial.
\textsuperscript{49} Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, 1804-1809, ADM Série J 24, vol. 1, p. 61-62.
porter and an Orinoco snake in the tall grass. However, there is no indication from my sources that slaves or slaveholders identified these convulsions and fits that had such a direct and obvious cause with sorcery based poisoning, despite the overlap in symptoms.

Several of these symptoms, especially stomach pains or the vomiting that was mentioned in three cases, overlapped with European conceptions of poisoning impacting the stomach; it is possible that these were not necessarily the primary symptoms reported by slaves, but rather the ones considered to be most significant by the slave owners and judges in these cases. However, it is also possible that the convergence of ideas about poisoning symptoms could lead to “dialogues of the deaf.” While early modern Europeans connected pains and problems associated with poison to the digestive tract, as their main idiom of poison centered on a consumed harmful substance, people in West Africa discussed similar symptoms as indications of poison/sorcery but through the idiom of the belly as the seat of emotions and poison as an act of sorcerous malice originating in negative emotions. The shared focus on the belly—with pains, cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea—opened up the possibility of slaveholders and slaves in the western Atlantic interpreting the same affliction as “poisoning” for very different reasons.

The way that slaves in some of these cases talked about their symptoms was also significant. In the cases of Marquis and Akkra in 1771 and Persenet and Abraham in 1798 their alleged targets described their symptoms not only as belly pains but specifically “belly pains and

50 Stedman, Narrative of a Five Year’s Expedition, 1796, vol. 2 133-134.
52 See MacGaffey, “Dialogues of the Deaf.”
53 For European theory on poisons, see the following poison treatises from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Mead, A Mechanical Account of Poisons in Several Essays; Fontana, Traité sur le vénin de la vipere; Orfila, Traité des poisons. For the significance of the belly in Africa and examples in West African languages, see Blier, African Vodun, 32-33, 145, 295, 309-310; Christaller, Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages, 556; Williamson, Dictionary of Òọchà Igbo, 5.
bonds/ties.”  

Suggestively, in an anecdote from a poison case in the *assises* court Dr. Rufz de Lavison sat on during his time in Martinique, a young enslaved woman testified with “passionate eloquence” against an older woman for “[tying] up” her child by passing her hand over his chest. Speakers of Njila and Kikongo Language Cluster (KLC) languages in West Central Africa made use of an idiom of “tying up” in relation to illness, medical practice, and sorcery, and innovated and expanded these words during the era of the transatlantic slave trade to discuss marching coffels and the local tribunals that convicted and sold so many for crimes that included poison/sorcery. Ewe, Fon and Akan speakers in West Africa also used the idiom of binding to discuss enslaved people, the ill, and verbs to “bind” sorcerers or “to poison.” While these African words largely did not survive the crossing to the Americas, people of African descent in the western Atlantic continued to adapt and make use of these durable idioms to talk about the experience of being poisoned, as well as their efforts to prevent it.

To avoid or combat sorcery afflictions, many slaves took preventative measures by commissioning protective talismans from black medical practitioners. Slaves used these amulets, called by many names, including *gri-gri*, *garde-corps*, *bolsas de mandinga* (or simply *bolsas*), or variations on “pouch” or “bag,” for many purposes beyond preventing illness. Each *bolsa* often had a unique function. While the ingredients and composition of *bolsas* yield insights on the ideas and material knowledge of practitioners, the uses slaves made of these pouches or charms offers an index of the concerns, hopes, and fears that they attempted to manage with them. Their

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54 Proces van Marquis en Akkra, 27 February 1771, NADH RVP vol. 819, p. 234; Proces van Present en Abraham, 8 September 1798, NADH RVP vol. 859, 1.
contemporaries in West Africa shared some of these concerns, while other concerns were more specific to the particular circumstances and violence of slave societies in the Americas. As with the bo power objects described by Blier’s twentieth-century informants, the bolsas commissioned and used by slaves in the Americas had a common theme of trying to achieve security: to improve the conditions of life in this world.\(^{58}\) While I did not find reference to specific empowerment objects in the Virginia county court records, Sharla Fett’s work on WPA narratives regarding nineteenth-century conjuring practices describes “conjure packets” used to cure, protect or harm, as well as the common trope of the conjure doctor finding the packet when investigating the cause of malevolent illness.\(^{59}\)

For their role as aids in crisis, bolsas or consecrated powders rubbed into the skin appeared frequently in descriptions of battles or rebellions. Maroons and rebels wore bolsas or obis to deflect bullets during Tacky’s Revolt in Jamaica (1760), the Cottica River Maroon Uprising in Suriname (1770s), and the Muslim Uprising in Bahia (1835).\(^{60}\) However, slaves used bolsas and other empowerment objects for a wide range of concerns. Archaeologists working with materials from the slave market at Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro have developed a theory on the layering of such objects—beads, cowries, crystals, teeth, horns, medallions, twisted rings of metal and plant fiber—with tattoos and scarification patterns to “weave the second skin”

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and protect against evil.\textsuperscript{61} The following is a list of uses of empowerment objects in the western Atlantic I have found, in addition to protection in battle:\textsuperscript{62}

- To cause death by poison\textsuperscript{63}
- To protect against enemies\textsuperscript{64}
- To prevent snakebite\textsuperscript{65}
- To prevent poisoning\textsuperscript{66}
- To prevent various injuries\textsuperscript{67}
- To prevent a whipping\textsuperscript{68}
- To make someone fall in love\textsuperscript{69}
- To avoid or treat illness\textsuperscript{70}
- To catch game in the woods\textsuperscript{71}
- To make oneself invisible or avoid detection when running away\textsuperscript{72}
- To increase courage\textsuperscript{73}
- To “tame” or make someone kinder\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{62} Suzanne Blier compiled a similar list of goals for empowerment objects in the Bight of Benin recorded by Olyme Bböly-Quénum, Julien Alapini, Melville Herskovits, and Albert de Survey. See Blier, \textit{African Vodun}, 117-118.


\textsuperscript{64} Denúncia de Rafael Margues, 11 December 1707, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 76, p. 59; Processo de dois soldados, 1781, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 12970. This last case focused on two deserters from the Bahia regiment who pretended to be priests and gave mass. Within the denunciation files for this case, one Padre Fortunato Gomas Carneiro also told the inquisitors about a man looking for a snakeskin and a “patua” (synonym of bolsa, a small pouche) a feitiçiero had prepared for him to protect him from his enemies.


\textsuperscript{66} Processo de Antônio Rodrigues da Silva, 1725, ANTT Series 28, f. 11426.

\textsuperscript{67} Processo de Antônio Rodrigues da Silva (1725); Procès de deux negres (1755).

\textsuperscript{68} de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”


\textsuperscript{70} Proces van La Rocke (1741), n.p.; Proces van Titus en Dafina, 30 November 1763, NADH RVP vol. 808, n.p.; Proces van Fiulo, 17 January 1774, NADH RVP vol. 825, p. 73; de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”

\textsuperscript{71} de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”

\textsuperscript{72} Proces van Baron, 10 May 1742, NADH RVP vol. 795, n.p.; Processo de João da Silva, 1750, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 502; Procès d’un negre et une negresse (1756), p. 531; de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”

\textsuperscript{73} Proceso de Luis Pereira de Almeida, 1750, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 1134; Procès de deux negres (1755), p. 297.

\textsuperscript{74} Denúncia de Manoel da Silva, 15 October 1703, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 75, p. 225; Proces van Clarinda en Nero, 7 August 1733, NADH RVP vol. 788, n.p.; Proces van Fortuijn en Africaan (1735), p. 24; Proces van Baron (1742), n.p.; Proces van Abraham, 10 May 1742, NADH RVP vol. 795, n.p.; Proces van Apollo, 4 August 1742,
To procure manumission\textsuperscript{75}

The frequency of instances of \textit{bolsas} intended to cause death should be taken with caution, as many of these sources were trials for alleged poisoning. It is entirely possible that there were uses of \textit{bolsas} ignored, unreported, or misunderstood in these court cases as they were not connected to alleged harm. There is also a major issue of confessions extracted by torture, which could skew descriptions of what slaves intended to do with these packets. However, while deadly usage may have been exaggerated, it was consistent with the uses of such objects described in contemporary West and West Central Africa.\textsuperscript{76}

A closer examination of “taming” as a sub-genre illuminates some of the ways slaves thought about protection and efforts to increase security. In the extreme insecurity of being a slave in the western Atlantic, numerous slaves turned to \textit{bolsas} or other means to “tame” their owners, overseers, or others in a position of power. For example, while awaiting his 1754 trial in Fort Royale, Jupiter was caught teaching another man how to make charms to “attract [the] benevolence” of their jailors.\textsuperscript{77} The connection between “taming” and other healing and associated functions of \textit{bolsas} listed above is in how people used such practices manage and improve the conditions of life in this world. Taming was essentially an effort to bend the emotions of another to a desired result, not unlike the uses related to love magic above; however, with the focus on slaveholders and overseers, the efforts by slaves to tame were also efforts to


\textsuperscript{76} Procès de Gabriel, Roze, et Sarra, May 1754, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 228; D. Fernando José de Portugal to Martinho de Melo e Castro, 24 December 1789, AHU Administração Central Bahia, Series Bahia-CA, box 70, f. 13366; João Joaquin da Silva to João José de Moura Magalhães, 28 March 1848, APEB Colônia e Provincia, Polícia assuntos diversos, maço 3113, f. 14.

\textsuperscript{77} Bosman, \textit{A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea}, 147, 153-154. For more on sorcery accusations in Angola, see Ferreira, \textit{Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World}, “Chapter 5 Religion and Culture.”

\textsuperscript{77} Procès de Jupiter et Gouan, July 1754, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 250.
flip the power relationships of the slave society. Slaveholders reacted to “taming” with great alarm, but the slaves who attempted to change their owners’ behavior likely saw their actions very differently.

For the slaves who commissioned empowerment objects for the purposes of altering the emotional state of slaveholders or overseers, taming could have been understood as a form of public healing. The general purpose of these empowerment objects was to improve security and the conditions of life—to improve individual health either as part of community health or selfishly at the expense of others. Taming was one of a variety of ways to try and assert control over one’s life. In her ethnographic work among modern Fon and Ewe speakers, Blier emphasizes the psychological power and significance of empowerment objects as ways for common people to manage anxiety as they navigate the precariousness of life and relationships to others. Slavery in the western Atlantic was a state of extreme precariousness, and slaveholders and the system that supported them had enormous power over slaves’ ability to maintain their health and relationships. In other words, while slaveholders considered actions taken by slaves to bend others to their will as alarming and harmful, whether or not they considered these actions to be physically “poisonous,” the slaves working with taming powers could have seen the same actions as working towards a public good.

Slaves often used verbs like to soften, cool, or make gentle when describing their taming efforts. The idea of coolness in the Bight of Benin is connected to language on the act of healing,

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79 For more on the concept of public healing, see the seminal work of Feierman and Janzen, eds. *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa*.

80 Reis, “Candomblé and Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” 69-70.


often described as the application of “cooling” measures, soothing the anger of a spirit, and a range of emotional states and characteristics, including “peaceful” (fa xome, “cool stomach”) and “friendliness” (xome fifa, “coolness of the stomach”). In 1789, a pardo man owned by the Archbishop of Bahia was caught attempting to place a small packet into his owner’s chocolate. He confessed that it contained small pieces of pedra de ara—a stone frequently noted in Bahian love magic—as a “remedy to soften his master” who had refused to free him. Similarly, in a 1733 case in Suriname, a woman named Clarinda sought the services of Nero, an enslaved medical practitioner from another plantation, to “soften” the ill-nature of the mistress who was “malicious” towards her. An unnamed woman in Martinique was also convicted and sentenced to assist in the execution of the man she purchased “drugs and ingredients” from in order to “make her mistress agreeable and prevent the Commandeur (driver) from wanting to hurt her.” What is particularly significant here is that the action of the taming was specifically directed to the emotional states of the targets: not simply to avoid punishment, but to make the person responsible for meting out punishment unwilling to do it.

In some cases, like that of the slave and the Archbishop’s chocolate above, the act of taming was intended to result specifically in manumission. For example, in 1754 two enslaved women named Roze and Sarra confessed that the powder a man on their plantation had given them to put in their mistress’ water would “procure liberty.” In a much later case, Bahian police recorded a group of free “Nagô” (an ethnic label likely meaning Yoruba), who had been liberated

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83 Blier, African Vodun, 73, 142. On twentieth-century Yoruba practices using herbs defensively to “cool” aggression, see Reis, Divining Slavery and Freedom, 73, 142.
84 D. Fernando José de Portugal to Martinho de Melo e Castro (1789).
85 Proces van Clarinda en Nero, n.p. For a similar case involving an enslaved woman trying to “soften” her master through “powders,” see Beeldsnijder, “Om Werk Van Jullie te Hebben”, 225.
86 Procès d’un negre et une negresse (1756), 531.
87 Procès de Habriel, Roze, et Sarra, 228.
from an illegal slaving ship and set to work at the Navy Arsenal, caught helping the slaves who worked there achieve manumission through spells.  

Given that these sources are records of trials and investigations, it is possible that the defendants in these cases claimed to have had no intent to kill in order to try and save themselves. For example, in the case of Clarinda and Nero above, both repeatedly insisted that their actions were not intended to harm, but to tame. Nero had sold Clarinda a concoction made from herbs gathered in the bush to put in her mistress’ water. Clarinda was alarmed when her mistress became ill and later died. According to Nero’s interrogation, shortly before her arrest Clarinda came back to tell him what had happened, exclaiming that they were going to die for what they had done. It is possible that they each claimed to have been trying to tame, not kill, in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to save themselves in the context of the trial. However, Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus’ re-visiting of the famous Makandal poisoning case in Saint-Domingue suggests that these taming efforts were likely to have been genuine and not intended to kill. This massive case began after what appears to have been a un-coerced confession on the initiative of an enslaved man named Médor, who in 1757 told the court in Cap Français that he and many others used magical powders to persuade owners to grant manumissions. Burnard and Garrigus tracked the timing and geographic relationships of the deaths attributed to poison and argue that a spread of mycotoxins from spoiled flour during the blockade that year was a likely culprit, suggesting that Médor and others who confessed to using “poison et malefice” to tame slaveholders may have believed that their actions had accidentally killed them.

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88 João Joaquim da Silva to João José de Moura Magalhães. João Reis discusses this case and others in a wave of poison cases in the second half of the nineteenth century. See Reis, Divining Slavery and Freedom, 135, along with the entirety of “Chapter 4 Witchcraft and Slavery.”
89 Proces van Clarinda en Nero, n.p. The court ordered Clarinda to be broken on the wheel and Nero to be burned at the stake.
90 Burnard and Garrigus, The Plantation Machine, 106-107. Documents on Médor’s confession, the interrogation of several enslaved women, and reports on the wider Makandal case were organized together by M. L. E. Moreau de
Healing in the western Atlantic included a community of both the living and the dead. Relationships with both were crucial to understanding and curing afflictions as these illnesses were embedded in webs of social context and conflict. People of African descent often considered aggrieved ancestors or living people to be the cause of certain kinds of illnesses, and healing centered on the identification of the exact cause—and the responsible party—through divination. The forced intimacy of plantations in the western Atlantic created spaces that were not necessarily harmonious, but could instead be spaces of uncertain trust filled with fear of attack from within. In these enslaved communities, the identification of individuals suspected of malevolently causing afflictions was essential for maintaining public health. Slave-led investigations into poisoning were themselves a form of public healing.

On Jagtlust plantation, slaves pointed to damaged relationships followed by illnesses as damning evidence of Swart Jan’s poisoning. One man claimed that Swart Jan had poisoned him to obtain his cotton hammock. A woman claimed that Swart Jan had wanted her for a second wife; when she refused him, he threatened to poison her and told her that she would die of disease. Since then, her menstrual period had stopped. The theme of a male medical practitioner attacking a woman who rejected him was not uncommon, nor were alleged poisonings of

Saint-Méry and can be found in the same box at the French colonial archives. See ANOM, Séries F3, box 88. Burnard and Garrigus’ arguments challenge the predominant interpretation of the Makandal case as an example of resistance and attempted revolt. See Fick, *The Making of Haiti*; Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries*.  
93 Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust*, xv, 16-17, 29. Geschiere compares witchcraft accusations from early modern European villages, nineteenth-century Candomblé houses, and his own forty years of fieldwork in Camaroon, with the central argument that witchcraft discourse addresses a common human issue—fear of attack form within—and that the links between witchcraft and intimacy in Africa were not unique. See also Fett, *Working Cures*, 87; Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America*, 54.
romantic rivals. Allegations of both were especially prevalent in Martinique. Other conflicts stemmed from relationships particular to the plantation context, such as that between black drivers and other slaves, the former being in the fraught position of being both leaders and the individuals responsible for enforcing labor and meting out punishments. Two men declared that, following a confrontation, Swart Jan, who was the Jagtlust driver, told them that they would “no more have a healthy hour.” It is significant that when Maskree came to Jagtlust, the first action he took was to interview Swart Jan and the wider enslaved community. Similar instances of black medical practitioners beginning their investigation by untangling webs of relationships and tensions within a community appeared in cases from 1660s New Grenada to 1740s Bahia to conjure narratives of the nineteenth-century US South.

While the overseer’s letter attached to the case of Swart Jan is frustratingly vague on the exact activities conducted by Maskree, it is plausible that he and the Jagtlust slaves conducted a ritual ordeal to determine whether Swart Jan was a poisoner. Such rituals, led by black medical practitioners, but requiring participation from the wider community, were often adapted to plantation contexts from West and West-Central African judicial procedures. One such ritual was

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94 For examples of the former, see: Denúncia de Macaco, 1 July 1698, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 71, p. 430; Denúncia de Thereza e Francisco, 19 November 1754, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 113, p. 318-319; Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat 1804-1809, Archives Départementales de la Martinique (ADM), Fonds Pierre-Clément de Laussat, vol. 1, p. 71-72; Pierre Dessalles to Albis de Gissac, 26 July 1823, in Pierre Dessalles, La vie d’un colon à la Martinique au XIXème Siècle: Correspondance 1808-1824, edited by Fenri de Fremont (La Haye de Puits: Imprimerie Cauchard, 1980), p. 94. For examples of the latter, see: Proces van Adoja, 21 May 1736, NADH RVP vol. 790, p. 89-90; Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 21 October 1749, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 109, p. 153-160; Procès de Thelemaque, July 1754, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 250; Procès de Toiny, July 1754, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 250; Procès d’un negre, January 1755, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 300. Eighteenth-century Virginia county court trial summaries are so sparse, often listing little more than basic information on the accused, the crime, and the outcome of the case, that it is difficult to pull motives from this data. However, the trope of conjure men causing afflictions among women did appear frequently in nineteenth-century conjure narratives. See Fett, Working Cures, 91.


96 Proces van Swart Jan, n.p.

the coffin ordeal, where a diviner interrogated a corpse to reveal the cause of death and the body then pulled coffin-bearers to the guilty party.\textsuperscript{98} Another common practice involved the accused willingly taking an oath and consuming a substance to prove their innocence—with a grisly death to follow if they lied.\textsuperscript{99} While some judicial practices, like the boiling water ordeal in a 1688 Bahian \textit{feitiçaria} accusation, were remarkably similar to contemporaneous practices in Africa, their adaptation to the specific contexts of power in the Americas often led to changes.\textsuperscript{100} For example, the Saramaca maroons incorporated torture to extract confession for poison cases—part of Dutch judicial proceedings, but absent from known evidence of contemporary African proceedings. Similarly, early nineteenth-century poison and \textit{obeah} investigations run by slaves in Berbice included extreme forms of violence as part of ordeals to identify culprits that were more a part of the plantation world of violence than African antecedents.\textsuperscript{101}

In Martinique, slaveholders and slaves employed a ritual involving branches of the \textit{medecinier} tree (\textit{Jatropha curcas}, commonly known as “Barbados nut,” “poison nut,” or “purging nut.”). While consumption of the seeds of \textit{J. curcas} can cause nausea, vomiting, and stomach pain—as reported by Mathieu Orfila in his 1814 \textit{Traité des poisons}—the leaves and


\textsuperscript{99} Such practices were even more widespread, appearing in accounts from Sierra-Leone to the Gold Coast to the Kingdom of Kongo. Atkins, \textit{A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies}, 52-53; Matthews, \textit{A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone on the Coast of Africa}, 124-127; Bosman, \textit{A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea}, 150. See also Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 933; Heywood and Thornton, \textit{Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles}, 106.

\textsuperscript{100} Sweet, \textit{Recreating Africa}, 121-123. For the full case, see \textit{Processo de Simão}, 1688, ANTT IL Series 28 Processos, no. 8464.

branches themselves do not cause a physical reaction on contact. Yet cases brought before the Conseil Supérieur in 1755 and 1767 each involved a ritual whereby slaves were lined up and tapped, in one case specifically by a small child, with a *medecinier* branch, resulting in the “guilty” to collapse in fits of convulsions and shouting. Slaveholders informing the court of these proceedings shared that it was the common opinion on plantations that contact with this branch would cause agony for the poisoner; this opinion continued to hold when Pierre-Clément de Laussat reported the ritual use of *medecinier* branches to identify poisoners in an 1807 diary entry. While it is unclear from these cases who specifically initiated each ordeal, it is clear that it required the active participation of the entire community.

Following these ordeals, members of the enslaved community sometimes led searches of the house of the accused. In the 1688 case of Simão in Bahia, this search resulted in the discovery of a pot of animal teeth and powders—which Simão later told the Lisbon Inquisitors was made from the heads of snakes as a cure for venomous bites. The slaves on Plantagie Jagtlust likewise found a pot of “*vergift*” in the cabin of Swart Jan and Griet. In both cases, from the accounts respectively given by the slaveholder and overseer to the court, it is clear that it was slaves who conducted the search of the cabins and reported their findings. Furthermore, in the case of Simão, after the boiling water ordeal, he allegedly confessed to killing other slaves to Domingos, Joanna, and Ursula—the slaveholder reported that he only heard this alleged confession second hand. Domingos himself, an enslaved man about twenty-five years old, testified to the commissioner that Simão had confessed to him, and both Domingos and Joanna

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testified to finding the pot Simão allegedly used for his “*feiticarias*.” As with acts of public healing, rituals conducted to identify poisoners or establish guilt in the western Atlantic relied upon community involvement.

The 1775 case of Quacoe in Suriname, as described in a letter to the Suriname court from the overseer H. C. Dorfeld, illustrates well the active participation of the crowd at multiple stages of an investigation. Following the death of an enslaved woman, who had suffered great pains in her belly and wasted away over several weeks, all of the slaves went to Dorfeld to accuse Quacoe of poisoning and request that he be put in irons. In addition to being the head carpenter, the text of Dorfeld’s letter suggests that Quacoe was a medical practitioner; the other slaves believed Quacoe had had the power to cure Quamina, but had refused to do so. At Quamina’s funeral, held in the slave quarters, the slaves ran around like “crazy animals” led by Quamina’s coffin, which they vehemently flung at Quacoe’s door. The crowd then searched Quacoe’s home for “Wisschy” (*wissi*—evidence of poison-sorcery), but found nothing. The crowd then washed the dead body and gave the water to Quacoe to drink: if guilty, he would die. Dorfeld noted to the court that he did not interfere, as Quacoe willingly drank the water to prove his innocence. However, this was not the end of the case. Some time later, still convinced that Quacoe was responsible for Quamina’s death, four men went to Quacoe’s house and began beating him—several young women with sticks joined in. There is some dispute between the account of Quacoe—who said that the men dragged him from his hut and began beating him—and that of the other men—who claimed instead that Quacoe had come out on his own, and that the brawl had escalated from a shouting confrontation. In any event, Dorfeld was alerted to the incident when Quacoe stumbled into the main house, “half dead” and covered with blood, and fainted on

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104 Processo de Simão, 1688, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 8464; Proces van Swart Jan, n.p.
the floor.\textsuperscript{105} At every step of this investigation—going in a group to the overseer, the coffin and oath-drinking ordeals, the public beating—enslaved men and women from Quacoe’s plantation were not only active participants but driving forces enacting justice against a perceived poisoner.

Suspicion from the slave quarters was a powerful force, driving some accused of poisoning to flee. In Suriname in particular, several cases of slaves caught in marronage involved poison accusations as their stated motive for running away. This is a curious detail and one that I have not found so directly stated elsewhere. One would imagine that drawing attention to accusations of poisoning—which was taken very seriously by eighteenth-century courts—would not be considered a useful strategy for reducing punishment for running away. And yet, I have found six cases from 1744 to 1776 of slaves telling the court that they ran away specifically because of accusations of poisoning levied against them by fellow slaves.\textsuperscript{106} Swart Jan told the court that he ran “out of fear,” that his wife’s suicide and his desperate attempt to cut himself stemmed from the accusation that they “went about with poison.”\textsuperscript{107} A poison accusation within an enslaved community could be a powerful force with severe consequences.

In Virginia, Martinique, and Suriname, slaves could not directly bring a case to court; when they brought their investigations to slaveholders, it was an owner or overseer who initiated court proceedings. Natalie Zemon Davis’ work on systems of justice in Suriname plantations suggests that slaves often handled affairs internally—conducting ordeals, adjudicating outcomes, and enforcing punishments—for minor crimes like theft or adultery, often resulting in some form

\textsuperscript{105} Proces van Quacoe en anders, 21 February 1775, NADH RVP vol. 827, p. 72-77. This case was focused on the men who beat Quacoe; the overseer noted in his letter to the court that he did not believe Quacoe guilty, but was sending him to give them an account in his own words. The court agreed, returning Quacoe to the plantation with no punishment, while sentencing Prins, Present, Benjamin, and Tamboes to the Spanish Buck.
\textsuperscript{107} Proces van Swart Jan, n.p.
of compensation. However, they were much more likely to go to slaveholders with accusations of poisoning/sorcery as something far more serious.\textsuperscript{108} Thirty cases in my dataset, mostly from 1730 to 1790, explicitly stated that slaves instigated the poison investigation in question and deliberately brought it to the attention of slaveholders. None of the Virginia records I examined had enough detail to say with whom the case originated, and the disproportionately high number of these cases from Surinam—accounting for twenty-four of the total—does not necessarily reflect a difference in the geographic rate of slave-led investigations as it does the degree of recorded detail. It is reasonable to suspect that there were more cases that slaves brought to slaveholders than ended up in courts, and even more cases that slaves handled internally; cases that were not recorded because they were never brought to the attention of slave owners or the colonial judicial system.\textsuperscript{109} However, by looking closely at these cases for which I do have information, I have identified common patterns.

Slaves in these cases did not launch investigations on behalf of alleged wrongs done to slaveholders, but to the enslaved community on the plantation or in the neighborhood. Twenty-three (77\%) involved enslaved targets, mostly from the same plantation, with the remaining seven having no stated target beyond a reputation for being a poisoner or going about with poison. In the 1688 case of Simão discussed earlier, eleven of slaves working on the same plantation as Simão and more from the surrounding neighborhood had died over the course of a year from “unknown illnesses,” prompting the slaves on Andre Gomes de Medina’s plantation to search Simão’s cabin.\textsuperscript{110} Likewise, in 1773 the slaves on Plantagie Pepperpot denounced Mars to the overseer for killing fifteen of their number with \textit{wiriwiri} that he had hidden in corners around

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\textsuperscript{108} Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 959.
\textsuperscript{109} Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 971.
\textsuperscript{110} Processo de Simão, 1688, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 8464, p. 10, 16v, 17v.
\end{flushleft}
the plantation—instigating his trial. Furthermore, just under half of the cases instigated by slaves involved accusations against black medical practitioners, with all but one accused of causing the illness or death of slaves through poison. The people on Inquisitorial Commissioner Manoel Anselmo de Almada’s tobacco plantation in the Bahian Recôncavo were so concerned about the freed “Gege” feiticeira Thereza that they “clamored” for action, informing him on a visit that she was responsible for “causing them illnesses unknown to the art of medicine.”

Enslaved witnesses had an important role in poison trials beyond the subset of cases that explicitly originated within enslaved communities. In my dataset, courts recorded specifically named slaves as witnesses in thirty-two cases. To further break down these cases, Virginia had seven, Bahia eight, Suriname seventeen, and Martinique zero. The number of Virginia cases with enslaved witnesses may be artificially low, as the majority of case summaries did not list the names of those testifying at all beyond “sundry” or “divers” witnesses, which may have included slaves. As the surviving eighteenth-century Martinique cases are summaries, it is unclear whether there were witnesses in individual cases or what their status was. For the Cour Prévôtale, as we’ll discuss more below, many of the cases centered on defendants forced to act as witnesses against other defendants—I have not included any such cases in this count, focusing only on enslaved witnesses who were not on trial themselves. Slave codes in Virginia, Martinique, and Suriname allowed slaves to act as witnesses only in trials of other slaves. For the Lisbon Inquisition, the commissioner in Bahia could discreetly interview anyone—free or enslaved—likely to have information regarding the case, though questions of reputation and the opinion of slaves were sometimes instead filtered through an interview with the slaveholder. Such was the case in the interview of Josefa Maria da Incarnação, who told the commissioner

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112 Denúncia de Thereza e Luís, 494.
what the slaves in her household had been saying about the activities of black medical
practitioners in the neighborhood. 113 Bahia was also unusual in that free people of color also
frequently made denunciations or were interviewed for testimony by commissioners in their
investigations—free people of color were absent as witnesses in the cases from Virginia,
Martinique, and Suriname. This difference can be attributed in part to the significant
demographic differences between Bahia and these other slave societies, with its high proportion
of free and freed people of African descent, as well as to the fact that many of these cases took
place in the city of Salvador and not on plantations out in the Recôncavo.

It is also often unclear the degree of coercion involved in requiring slaves to testify
against each other. When the Suriname court examined Hendrick, Coffie, Quassie, and Alida
about the activities of Francies, a man from the same plantation, all but Hendrick denied having
any information; their testimony suggests that they were suspected of having information and
brought before the court, not that they volunteered.114 However, initial denunciations made by
slaves to the Inquisitorial commissioner in Bahia were by their nature supposed to be voluntary
and secret. Vicente Francisco de Britto, an enslaved crioulo owned by a Capitão mor in São
Gonçalo parish, not only voluntarily went to the Inquisition to denounce the freed medical
practitioner Simão but likely did so against the wishes of his owner.115 What the records I have
do suggest is that the testimony of slaves against other slaves could carry significant weight; in
most of these cases, they were the only witnesses, and their testimony was often the only
evidence against the accused.

What is knowable about these witnesses—their relationships, perspectives, and even the
content of their testimony—varies significantly between the records of different courts. I did not

113 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, p. 153.
114 Proces van Francies, 16 August 1738, NADH RVP vol. 792, p. 131.
find explicit mention of witnesses in the Martinique Conseil Supérieur trial summaries. Unsurprisingly, the Virginia county court summaries offer only fragments. For example, a man named “Africa”—so named for an African birth?—testified against Boatswain, an enslaved medical practitioner on another plantation, in 1764 for “Preparing and administering Poisonous medicines,” testimony that contributed to a conviction.\(^{116}\) Anda, an enslaved woman, was the sole witness against Squire and Myrsilla in 1754; a decade earlier, three enslaved men from different plantations, Warrick, Mingo, and Roben, testified against Tom for allegedly poisoning Joe—who lived on the same plantation as Warrick.\(^{117}\) The Inquisitorial commissioners in Bahia and the officers in Lisbon who dutifully copied out their reports into the *cadernos do promotor* routinely gathered more information on witnesses along with the recording of their statements. From Ignez’s denunciation of Bento José—a *mulato* with possible Amerindian ancestry locally “famed” as a *feiticeiro* and accused of using magic to charm at least two women, “compelling” the affections of both a Brazilian-born *parda* widow and a woman from Angola—it is clear that Ignez was born in Brazil, reported exclusively African ancestry, and was a slave at the Hospicio dos Religiosos de Nossa Senhora da Piedade, a convent and church run by the Capuchins in Salvador.\(^{118}\) Why did she choose to go to the commissioner? Did she know either of these women well? From the denunciation, I do not know. Examinations by the Suriname court usually involved a template of basic questions for both witnesses and defendants, beginning with name and occupation or owner. For Dosoe, testifying against Coffie in 1739, this information was summarized in the header for his examination: “Neeger Dosoe, belonging to the widower Jan

\(^{116}\) Trial of Boatswain, 27 December 1764, LVA Amelia CCOB, vol. 8, p. 327. As the court determined that there was “no bad consequence” and no sign of “bad intent,” they reduced Boatswain’s sentences to a brand mark on his left hand and thirty-nine lashes.


\(^{118}\) Denúncia de Bento José, 8 October 1748, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 109, p. 14.
Nulle.” However, especially in cases where multiple slaves testified, the court instead recorded their testimony in a list or a summary that combined their statements together. In still other cases, the court did not separately examine the witness, but brought them in during the examination of the defendant to confront them directly: such was the case of Quassie, brought in during the examination of Samsam to claim that Samsam carried *vergift* in a horn—a charge that Samsam persisted was false. In each of these cases, the court recorded the testimony of the enslaved witnesses in rich detail: from Dosoe’s witnessing the discovery of a jaw bone allegedly planted by Coffie under the cabin of a man to make him ill, to the collective recollection of Fortuijn, Coridon, Cupido, and Willem of how Isaac had collapsed while digging a ditch and how they carried him back to his cabin.

There is another category of witnesses, not included in the tally above, where defendants were forced to name accomplices and testify against them. These cases were markedly different from the ones described above, where none of the witnesses were on trial, and they could produce large “chains” of cases. In Martinique and Suriname, the enormous pressure on defendants to confess and name names was amplified by the legal use of torture. The situation of defendants forced to become witnesses is most notable in the proceedings of the 1820s Cour Prévôtale in Martinique, where the thirty cases over five years involved a staggering 368 defendants. In more than half of these cases, the inclusion of multiple defendants explicitly stemmed from accusations made by other defendants—often consisting of the only evidence in these cases. For example, in 1823 Pierre (called Saindoux) and Etienne confessed respectively to distributing and receiving poison, implicating each other in their interrogations; Etienne further

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119 Proces van Coffie, 20 April 1739, NADH RVP vol. 793, p. 56.
120 See, for example, Proces van Assurant, 27 May 1737, NADH RVP vol. 791, p. 72.
named Régis and Laurent as suppliers and instructors of poisoning. All four were executed.\textsuperscript{122} In an 1824 case involving fourteen slaves and two free people of color, a convoluted web of confessions and accusations by defendants was the only evidence recorded, resulting in eight executions, one execution in effigy for a man who had managed to run, one banishment, and six sentences to a public whipping and labor for life at the galleys in France.\textsuperscript{123} The content of the testimony in the Cour Prévôtale, centered on poisoning cults with much more frequent mentions of mineral or chemical poisons like arsenic and many fewer mentions of medical practitioners than in eighteenth-century cases, also strongly suggests that as these cases ballooned the testimony that defendants were forced to give against each other reflected slaveholder fears and hysteria much more than concerns of the enslaved.\textsuperscript{124} In between their first and second interrogations, Eugène and Luc added a new and unique accusation against Roche of giving mules powdered herbs to kill them, suggesting that these two men changed their testimony to what they thought the court wanted to hear.\textsuperscript{125} The pressure on these men to name others and their alleged poisonings would have been enormous.

While some slaves, like those at Plantagie Jagtlust, deliberately sought out the overseer or slaveholder to take further action beyond their investigation, in other cases that ended up before courts the slaves involved clearly never intended for their investigation to go beyond their internal system of justice. Evidence from the early nineteenth century suggests a shift in the ways slaves made use of both colonial courts and the law of slaveholders in their plantations. While slaves had specifically brought several cases to slave owners during the mid-eighteenth-century

\textsuperscript{122} Procès de Etienne, Pierre, Régis, et Laurent, 6 December 1823, ADM Série U7, vol. 1 p. 16.
\textsuperscript{123} Procès de Barbe et outres, 16 August 1824, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{124} See Oudin-Bastide, \textit{L’effroi et la terreur}; Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror.”
\textsuperscript{125} Procès de Henry et outres, 15 December 1825, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, p. 33. Oddly, given the court’s readiness to accept similar testimony as enough for conviction, in this case the court determined that the addition of this new accusation after the initial interrogation was too suspicious, discharging Roche.
peaks of trials, likely influencing many more as slaveholders sought general opinion from the plantation to identify suspected poisoners, by the nineteenth century they increasingly conducted divinations, ordeals, and punishments of suspected poisoners in secret. It is important not to overstate this shift, and to recognize that we may never know of actions taken secretly in slave quarters precisely because of their secret nature. The rituals to identify poisoners that many slaveholders had sanctioned and participated in began to shift at the same time that the number of poison cases tried by the courts declined; owners also increasingly classified efforts to root out suspected poisoners through magical means as dangerous superstitions to be stamped out. While someone like Maskree in 1744 had the full support of the overseer Versteegh and the enslaved community at Plantagie Jagtlust, by the early nineteenth century medical practitioners like him were at just as high a risk of being arrested for conducting an ordeal to find a poisoner as they were for allegedly causing harm. It was during this same time period that—with the Maritnine Cour Prévôtale as an important exception—that poison trials overall declined and, in courts including the Cour Prévôtale, the proportion of medical practitioners among the accused also declined.\(^{126}\)

Evidence suggests that slaves seeking to conduct poison investigations in the early nineteenth century prudently tried to avoid slaveholder involvement. The handful of cases related to poisoning investigated by the Office of the Fiscal of Berbice in the 1810s and 20s focused on actions taken to identify sources of illnesses, not on those who allegedly caused illnesses themselves. For example, in two cases of medical practitioners, Hans (1819) and Willem (1823),

\(^{126}\) ANTT Inquisição Lisboa Series 30 Cadernos do Promotor and Series 28 Processos; APEB Seção Judiciário, Devassas; Schwarz, *Twice Condemned*, Table 10, p. 96 (for the Virginia data); NADH Raad van Politie en Criminele Justitie; NA-Kew CO 116 British Guiana, Berbice Records of the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice; ANOM Série F3 Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, Annales du Conseil souverain de la Martinique; ANOM Dépôt des papiers des colonies, greffes Martinique, Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre; ANOM Série C8 Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808); ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale.
slaves on each plantation hired them to identify individuals responsible for causing illnesses and deaths with poison/sorcery. In both cases, the primary concerns of the court were not the suspected poisonings, but the fact that the black drivers had secretly organized dangerous and illegal divination rituals that resulted in injuries and, in the case of Willem, the beating and death of the suspected culprit.\textsuperscript{127} A British colony from 1815, Berbice was subject to the series of anti-\textit{obea}h legislation of the British Caribbean; poison and alleged harm became less significant than the practice of \textit{obea}h, which included attempts to identify poisoners.\textsuperscript{128} In Jamaican \textit{obea}h, the 1820s was a pivotal decade, where the \textit{obea}h practitioners who were prosecuted were no longer tried for allegedly causing harm, but for conducting healing rituals—rituals which may have included efforts to divine and identify poisoners as threats to community health.\textsuperscript{129}

Data from Suriname cases, which had the most detailed trial records—and correspondingly the most cases that clearly identified accusations originating within enslaved communities—suggest that slaves sought to involve slaveholders or courts less frequently in their investigations of poisoners after the 1770s. While the 1740s had been the peak of poison cases here, slaves were specifically identified as instigating the highest proportions of cases in the 1730s (31%) and 1770s (33%). While the total number of cases dropped significantly in the 1780s and 90s, cases with enslaved instigators fell disproportionately, with only two such cases in these decades.\textsuperscript{130} The high proportion of slave instigated cases in the earliest poison trials makes sense in the context of slaves contributing major foundations to ideas of what made a poisoner in the western Atlantic. Likewise, as trials took on a life of their own and slave owners

\textsuperscript{128} Paton, \textit{The Cultural Politics of Obeah}, 83. See all of “Chapter 3 Creole Slave Society, Obeah, and the Law.” See also Handler and Bilby, \textit{Enacting Power}.
\textsuperscript{129} Boaz, “Instruments of Obeah,” 149.
\textsuperscript{130} NADH RVP vol. 787-858.
began to see poisoning everywhere, it is not surprising that the total number of cases dwarfed those identified as beginning with investigations by slaves. The difference between the eighteenth-century case summaries from the Conseil Supérieur and the detailed cases in the Cour Prévôtale suggest a similar pattern. The former, while short on details in many of the cases, identified at least one as having specifically originated in accusations by slaves, while in the thirty detailed cases of the latter not a single case described an initial investigation conducted by slaves.¹³¹

A case from 1819 Virginia illustrates well the tensions within enslaved communities, slave-led investigations, and some of the subtle changes over time in both their willingness to go to slaveholders and the possible outcomes of this action.¹³² The case was revealed through a series of letters between Joel Yancey, the Poplar Forest overseer, and his employer Thomas Jefferson. Starting in January, Yancey began to worry about a return of a “bowel complaint” that had resulted in the deaths of nine children the previous summer. While reassuring Jefferson that he doubted the current wave of illnesses would be serious, and noting the painful blistering he administered on the advice of the (white) doctor, at least one of the afflicted Poplar Forest slaves “[would] not acknowledge that she [was] any better.”¹³³ Within the month, the number of afflictions and mortality began to climb.¹³⁴ A young man named Hercules was among the

¹³¹ Procès d’un negre (1756), ADM Série U7.
¹³² Todd Lee Savitt discussed this particular case in seminal work on medicine and slavery. See Savitt, Medicine and Slavery, 178-179.
afflicted at Poplar Forest, though much recovered by June.\textsuperscript{135} In April, Yancey reported that Hall, who had suffered under his affliction for the past three months, “says he is poisoned, and none but a negro Doctr can save him.” Hall’s request put Yancey in a difficult position, as he could not “consent to imploy [sic] those people, unless instructed.”\textsuperscript{136} One imagines that Jefferson may have banned the use of such a “negroe Doctr” after an earlier series poisoning events from 1798 to 1800. However, by June, the affliction seemed to have spread to Monticello, where so many were affected that “they have not enough well to attend the sick.”\textsuperscript{137}

Finally, in July, Yancey had something more concrete to report on the mysterious illnesses. The slaves at Poplar Forest, many of whom were still ill, “charg[ed] Hercules with Poisoning and the cause of all deaths here for the last 12 months.” They referenced Hercules’ intimacy with an unnamed “Negroe Doctr,” and told Yancey that he had procured “physic” from him. Significantly, the Poplar Forest slaves had not gone to Yancey right away with their accusation, but “have kept it concealed from me till the other day.” It is unclear from Yancey’s letter why they decided to bring their denunciation to him when they did, but as soon as he heard of it he brought both Hercules and the “Negroe Doctr” to a Mr. Clay.\textsuperscript{138} The county court acquitted Hercules on a lack of evidence, returning him to Poplar Forest plantation. This outcome was not unusual. As the number of poison cases declined in the nineteenth century, courts handed down more and more acquittals. In the eleven trials of slaves for poisoning in Brunswick and Cumberland Counties from 1800 to 1839, six ended with a “not guilty” verdict.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{136} Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, 10 April 1819, Early Access Document, \textit{Founders Online}, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, \url{http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0322}.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, 1 July 1819, Early Access Document, \textit{Founders Online}, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, \url{http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0571}.
\end{itemize}
and another two were found not guilty of the felony charge. Jefferson was unsuccessful in court again three years later, when he brought Hercules and two others to trial for attacking and stabbing an overseer. Following this incident, Jefferson had the three men whipped in front of the other slaves, then sold to New Orleans; Hercules became sick and died shortly after his arrival on the Mississippi.

The case of Hercules points to an important problem with trying to understand how enslaved communities understood poisoning events: I can only see what Yancey and Jefferson recorded. I do not know from these letters what may have occurred during Hercules’ alleged visit to the “Negroe Doctr,” or how the other slaves at Poplar Forest determined that Hercules was responsible for the illnesses, or why they chose to go to Yancey when they did. If there had been an internal investigation, ordeal, or visit to a conjure-man or woman to divine the sources of illness, the people of Poplar Forest prudently conducted it in secret, informing Yancey only when satisfied with Hercules’ guilt. It is not unreasonable to suspect that they knew about the past involvement of Monticello slaves with “conjurors” twenty-years prior, and of the antipathy of Jefferson and a great many other slave owners in the early nineteenth century towards medical practitioners of African descent. I do not know for sure. Like many of the poison cases in this study, I can see it only in fragments. However, limited as they are, these fragments, when read in relation with dozens of other cases, point to a world largely hidden from the sight and recording pens of slaveholders: a world of fraught community where the enslaved struggled for autonomy over the care of themselves, their families, and their friends; a world where they banded

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139 LVA Brunswick CCOB vol. 19-35; LVA Cumberland CCOB vol. 1797-1801 to 1839-44.
together—with or without support from slaveholders—to protect each other from perceived threats to the health of the same. That these threats included the same black medical practitioners sought out for healing and protection in a world of violence should not prompt us to ignore or look away from these cases as uncomfortable instances of ‘misplaced aggression,’ but rather to see them as key to slaves’ struggles to reassert control over their lives.

Swart Jan’s case did not end well for him. During his three separate interrogations in Fort Zeelandia from late June to early September 1744, the court repeatedly challenged his denials of poisoning with statements from the Jagtlust slaves and the overseer Versteegh. Finally, on December 10th the court brought the case to a close, declaring Swart Jan guilty of poisoning and running away. Five days later he was broken on the wheel in the plaza just outside of the Fort, his head mounted in the Suriname River as a warning to others.141 This case provides not only a vivid reminder of colonial power over the lives of the enslaved, but also insight into slaves’ conceptions of poison, healing, and justice. No other slaves from Jagtlust were physically present at the trial, but their testimony made up the bulk of the evidence; it was their investigation that prompted judicial proceedings. The entwined nature of public healing, poison, and community justice in the Jagtlust slave quarters was laid bare in the last haunting image from Versteegh’s account to the court: of Maskree and the Jagtlust slaves standing together by the waterside, silently watching the boat taking Swart Jan across the river.

141 Proces van Swart Jan, n.p.
CHAPTER 5: REPUTATION AND RISK: BLACK MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS AND POISON CASES

By the time they opened their healing clinic on the outskirts of Salvador, Bahia, free black medical practitioners Paulo Gomes and Ignacia were already well known in the sloping streets behind the city center. Their neighbors, interviewed in 1749 by the city’s Inquisitorial commissioner, had shared a street with Gomes for decades; their work performing cures with calundús was not a secret, nor were their efforts to continuously expand and improve their practice. A free pardo (likely Brazilian-born) stonemason, Gomes purchased both the freedom of Ignacia, an African-born slave and master calunduzeira (dancer of calundús), and a farm where they could work together as partners. Ignacia led divinatory dances and prescribed and made cures for the afflicted who came to them. Gomes continuously sought out new streams of medical knowledge and advertised this knowledge to potential clients. Working side-by-side for over thirty years with one of his pardo neighbors as a stonemason, Gomes confided in him many times that he wished to be successful and sought out “various black sorcerers” to learn; another neighbor noted that Gomes had traveled widely to visit other feitiçeiros. A middle-aged white widow, also a resident of Rua de Poeyre, told the commissioner of how Gomes came to her several times in her long-running illness to offer treatment at his farm, claiming that he could use his practice to bring her luck, wealth, “and everything she hopes for.” Once, while hearing mass at Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Piedade, Gomes turned to another neighbor and pew mate, a white painter, and told him about a Castilian book he had acquired that taught both how to make malefícios and how to cure them. People across a wide social spectrum—free, enslaved, black, white—went to Gomes and Ignacia for their medical knowledge and expertise; their success as practitioners rested upon their powerful reputation.
However, success went hand-in-hand with risk. As the reputation of Gomes and Ignacia grew, so did the suspicion that they were responsible for malevolent afflictions in the area; the same power that attracted clients also made them morally ambiguous in the eyes of their neighbors. Multiple witnesses said that Gomes was “notorious” for killing the white husband of a former lover with feitiços. One neighbor referenced this piece of public knowledge in her testimony to explain why suspicion landed on Gomes so quickly in her household. When several of her slaves had become sick and died in the months after the discovery of a maleficio hidden in the house, “all attributed [it] to the feitiçaria” of Gomes. The reputation of Gomes and Ignacia, and attendant suspicions, extended well beyond their personal network as some of their neighbors sought outside help with their afflictions. When a white neighbor brought his afflicted wife to another black medical practitioner on the other side of town, part of the attempted cure involved divination to identify the person who had made the maleficio. After spending some time in Gomes’ neighborhood, the practitioner told the man that Gomes was responsible and a “bad neighbor.”

Two different competitors in Salvador’s medical marketplace denounced Gomes and Ignacia in two different ways; both denunciations hinged on their fame for the powers to heal and harm. The unnamed preto (black, likely African) practitioner consulted by the white neighbor and his wife did not instigate any sort of trial from the Inquisition or secular court, but he did identify Gomes as the source of harm as part of the medical narrative he built with his clients. The formal denunciation that led to the documentation of this case came from Dr. José Xavier Tovar, a white surgeon and fellow parishioner, who had heard about Gomes and Ignacia’s calundus after speaking with several of Gomes’ neighbors. Climbing the hill to the office of the Inquisitorial commissioner in the center of the city, Tovar denounced the couple for superstitious
practices and feitiçaria. In the ensuing investigation, the commissioner conducted interviews with neighbors and the details on their practices came pouring out.¹

While unusually detailed, this case was not unique—neither were the strategies, practices, and risks of the practitioners involved. Tracking the actions and relationships of medical practitioners of African descent through poison cases across the slave societies of the western Atlantic reveals not only complex webs of intimacies and relationships, but also “networks of knowledge.”² Practitioners like Gomes and Ignacia built their reputations over many years, establishing a wide clientele and incorporating multiple strands of medical authority. Carefully cultivated networks of clients and knowledge formed the basis of prestige for black medical practitioners, placing them in a powerful, but precarious, position. The same reputation, visibility, and expertise necessary to successfully attract clientele also made black medical practitioners vulnerable to denunciations.

Historians have recently turned towards examining the ways black medical practitioners built their medical knowledge and their role in knowledge creation. Works on circulation of medical knowledge and practices in the Atlantic, and the ways that ideas on illness and health impacted each other and changed through their interaction, have flourished in the past two decades.³ Several recent works have focused on the relationships between medical practitioners of African descent and the emergence of empiricism. They have analyzed ways these practitioners developed and revised their cures and rituals based on experience, with their

³ See, for example (in chronological order): Fett, Working Cures; Palmié, Wizards and Scientists; Sweet, Recreating Africa; de Barros, “‘Setting things right’”; Walker, Doctors, Folk Medicine and the Inquisition; Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries; Parrish, American Curiosity; Santos, “As bolsas de mandinga no espaço Atlântico”; Calainho, Matrópole das mandingas; Parés and Sansi, eds., Sorcery in the Black Atlantic; Sweet, Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World; Voeks and Rashford, eds., African Ethnobotany in the Americas; Ogundiran and Saunders, eds., Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic; Breen, “Tropical Transplantations”; Gómez, The Experiential Caribbean; Schiebinger, Secret Cures of Slaves.
success dependent on the locally perceived efficacy of their work. Historians have traced the ways they constantly reconstructed, tested, and incorporated new practices through vast networks of knowledge. To adapt a phrase from historian Pablo Gómez, the Caribbean was a space of “medicinal promiscuity”—black medical practitioners continuously adopted and adapted diverse practices to serve a diverse clientele. Looking at poison cases from such a wide range of locations in the slave societies of the western Atlantic reveals connections between the specific strategies these practitioners used to build their networks of knowledge, and, crucially, the ways that these same strategies made practitioners vulnerable. The very cultivation of networks of knowledge and clients that made medical practitioners of African descent successful also put them at higher risk of being accused of being poisoners—from slaveholders, slaves, and other practitioners.

This chapter focuses on black medical practitioners—Africans and creoles of African descent who were identified as conducting some form of healing practice—as opposed to other kinds of medical practitioners—including white physicians and Catholic priests—because they were the kinds of practitioners who were accused of poisoning. With the exception of five people in Bahia—three white women (1687, 1721, 1753), one white man (1725), and one mestiço man (1790)—all of the medical practitioners accused in poisoning cases across these four locations

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5 Gómez, The Experiential Caribbean, 132; Schiebinger, Secret Cures of Slaves, “Chapter 2 Experiments with the Negro Dr’s Materia Medica.” See also James Sweet’s work for a discussion of how African ritual healing practices and Portuguese Catholicism impacted each other in the circum-Atlantic. Sweet, Recreating Africa, “Chapter 9 African Catholicism in the Portuguese World” and “Chapter 10 The Impacts of African Religious Beliefs on Brazilian Catholicism.” By focusing on the ways these practitioners built their networks of knowledge and on what their medical rituals “did” in the world, historians have also been pushing past both the older debates on creolization and limiting frameworks of resistance. See Ogundiran and Saunders, “On the Materiality of Black Atlantic Rituals,” 4, 16-21; Gómez, The Experiential Caribbean, 6-7.
for the entire 170-year period were black. The following tables highlight differences and changes over time between the four locations on the demographics of the black medical practitioners accused in poisoning cases. As a word of caution, it should be kept in mind that this analysis reflects only the surviving records of those who were accused, and not necessarily those who practiced. There are also significant variations in the kinds of information recorded by different court systems. For example, most of the courts did not consistently record whether a person of African descent was born in Africa or the Americas, but they all recorded gender. While the differences are not insignificant, what stands out are the remarkable similarities between regions and consistency over the peak decades of the eighteenth century (see Table 2.1 for an overview of the total number of cases and cases involving medical practitioners by decade).

Table 5.1: Demographics of Black Medical Practitioners in Bahia Poison Cases, 1680-1849

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M  F</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Slave</td>
<td>African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1680-99</td>
<td>10 (59%)</td>
<td>4 6</td>
<td>4 6</td>
<td>4 6</td>
<td>2 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700-19</td>
<td>8 (29%)</td>
<td>3 5</td>
<td>4 4</td>
<td>3 5</td>
<td>3 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1720-39</td>
<td>2 (33%)</td>
<td>1 1</td>
<td>2 0</td>
<td>0 2</td>
<td>2 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740-59</td>
<td>20 (27%)</td>
<td>8 12</td>
<td>11 9</td>
<td>8 12</td>
<td>9 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760-79</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>2 0</td>
<td>0 2</td>
<td>0 2</td>
<td>0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-99</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-19</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820-39</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840-49</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (30%)</td>
<td>18 24</td>
<td>21 21</td>
<td>15 27</td>
<td>16 26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* % of total people accused

Sources: ANTT Inquisição Lisboa Series 30 Cadernos do Promotor and Series 28 Processos de Fé; APEB Seção Judiciário, Devassas Cachoeira.

For the five accused medical practitioners who were not of African descent, see Denúncia de Mariana Pinheira, 8 July 1687, ANTT IL 30, vol. 59, p. 235-236; Denúncia de Antonia da Costa, 5 August 1721, ANTT IL 30 vol. 113, p. 254-255; Processo de António Rodrigues da Silva, 1725, ANTT IL 28 f. 11426; Denúncia de Joanna Florencia, 5 April 1753, ANTT IL 28, vol. 113, p. 184; Processo de Pedro Rodrigues, 1790, ANTT IL 28, f. 6881. The case of Antonia da Costa is particularly interesting, as she had already been tried once before by the Lisbon Inquisition and sent from her native Portugal to Bahia as an exile. The denunciation against her for divination, removing feitiços, and killing an enslaved woman with maleficio did not result in another trial.
Bahia is unique among the four locations not only for the richness of meticulously recorded demographic detail in the surviving cases, but also for the gender and status ratios. Unlike the other locales, the ratios between men and women and free and enslaved black medical practitioners were close to even; women actually outnumbered men among the accused for most of the period. Both the inquisitorial commissioners and the courts assembling *devassas* (investigations) noted whether accused individuals were born in Africa or Brazil, occasionally with greater detail. For example, in the 1740s the commissioners identified a freed medical practitioner named Mariana and her enslaved partner Francisca—well known for making cures and “malefícios” through possession by the spirits of their dead sons—as both “Mina,” and an enslaved *curandeiro* named Miguel as “Angola.” These designations were used so broadly that they do not point to specific points of origin, but can distinguish between Africans born in West vs. West Central Africa. Both regions were represented in close to even numbers among accused practitioners, with five people identified as “Angola,” five “Mina,” and five unspecified Africans. Creoles—born in Brazil—made up a slight majority of the black medical practitioners accused, suggesting that African origin alone was neither necessary for medical practice or for being suspected of malevolent sorcery. Bahia is also unique for having a significant proportion—though a minority—of the accused living in an urban area as opposed to a plantation in the sugar-producing Recôncavo or the backlands. A slight majority forty-three of the total eighty-one *feitiçaria* cases handled by the inquisition originated in the city of Salvador, a city of approximately 25,000 people by 1724. As the case of Paulo Gomes and Ignacia attests, the dense neighborhoods where people of many social backgrounds and statuses lived in intimate proximity offered both rich opportunities for medical practitioners to expand their clientele and

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7 Denúncia de Mariana e Francisca, 18 July 1745, ANTT IL 30 vol. 106, p. 128; Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 25 July 1746, ANTT IL 30 vol. 118, p. 90-94.
threats of sorcerous harm. In terms of changes over time, the demographics of Bahian medical practitioners of African descent were fairly stable up to the 1770s—when they disappeared entirely from cases. In this same decade the total number of cases also dropped significantly, which was undoubtedly a contributing factor.

The demographics of black medical practitioners accused of poisoning in Suriname were remarkably stable over the eighteenth century. The vast majority were enslaved men, with only two free practitioners brought to court. Both Coffij Tampeco (1765) and Schipio van Anka (1770) were identified as “vrij bosch negers”—recognized free members of maroon communities. Tampeco allegedly traveled to a plantation and sold services involving a calabash with herbs and “vergift” (poison) to two enslaved men, Gabriel and Chrispijn, a free “mulat”

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9 On the malevolent dangers of intimacy in neighborhoods, villages, and slave quarters, see Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust.*

10 Process van Coffij Tampeco en anders, 27 November 1765, NADH RVP vol. 811, n.p.; Proces van Schipio van Anka, Apollo, en Jasmijn, 17 July 1770, NADH RVP vol. 818, p. 51-59. Neither case identifies which maroon group Tampeco and van Anka were members of. For more on the relationship between Suriname’s maroon communities and the colonial government in the mid-eighteenth century, see Price, *Alabi’s World.*

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| Table 5.2: Demographics of Black Medical Practitioners in Suriname Poison Cases, 1720-1829 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                                 | Total (%)*         | Gender M F        | Status Free Slave |
| 1720-39                         | 7 (37%)           | 7 0              | 0 7              |
| 1740-59                         | 19 (37%)†         | 18 1             | 0 19             |
| 1760-79                         | 24 (22%)          | 20 4             | 2 22             |
| 1780-99                         | 5 (29%)           | 5 0              | 0 5              |
| 1800-19                         | -**               | - -              | - -              |
| 1820-29                         | 1 (50%)           | 1 0              | 0 1              |
| Total                           | 56 (29%)          | 51 5             | 2 54             |

* % of total people accused
† The volumes for 1751 and 1755-1759 have not survived, likely skewing numbers for this decade
** There are RVP volumes for these two decades, but I have not conducted research in them
Sources: NADH RVP vol. 781-918
named Anthony Sampson. Van Anka was also accused of selling “vergift” to slaves, allegedly at the request of one Apollo to poison the white manager. While not the “typical” black medical practitioners accused in poison cases, these two individuals suggest connections and relationships that extended beyond plantation borders into maroon communities. The Court of Criminal Justice and Policy did not consistently record a distinction between Africans and creoles, though there are two cases identifying more specific African origins of the medical practitioners involved. For example, an enslaved man named Alexander was noted as “Loango”—likely sold from the region just north of the Congo River. He was accused of both selling certain herbs stored in a pipe that were allegedly used to poison other slaves and other herbs to cure an enslaved woman.\(^{11}\) Another man named Port, a “Coromantee,” was well known for his knowledge and herb craft. He allegedly threatened his owner with death before running away.\(^{12}\) Though I do not have enough information to analyze potential differences between African and creole practitioners, it is clear that the “typical” black medical practitioner accused of poisoning in Suriname was both enslaved and male.

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\(^{12}\) Proces van Port, 29 July 1762, NADH RVP vol. 806, n.p.
Table 5.3: Demographics of Black Medical Practitioners
Brunswick & Cumberland Counties, VA, 1740-1849

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1740-59</td>
<td>5 (63%)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760-79</td>
<td>10 (53%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-99</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-19</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820-39</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840-49</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31 (52%)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* % of total people accused
Sources: LVA Cumberland CCOB vol. 1749-51 to 1844-51; LVA Brunswick CCOB vol. 1-36.

The data on accused black medical practitioners from Cumberland and Brunswick county courts—which only tried enslaved people for criminal cases—similarly shows men outnumbering women. While the relatively low numbers should encourage caution, data from the end of the eighteenth century suggests a possible increase in concern about enslaved women as medical practitioners. The gender ratio of all enslaved people tried for poisoning in these counties follows a similar trend, with women as a slight majority of the accused in the 1780s and 90s and a much smaller minority in the preceding decades—one of eight in the 1760s, and two of eight in the 1770s. Of the nine total women tried for poisoning in the 1780s and 90s, medical practitioners were just under half of them. The cases of Charity (1780, tried alongside Jubelo and Andrew), Grace (1781), Susanna (1787), and Pegg (1798)—each tried in Brunswick county—were split between the alleged targets of their ‘poisonous medicines.’ Charity and Pegg were accused of creating and administering such medicines to their owners, while Grace and Susanna were accused of doing so to slaves on other plantations. None of the cases ended with a criminal conviction.
conviction. Only one woman identified as a medical practitioner was executed for poisoning in these two counties: Dido, who was hanged on the order of the Brunswick county court in 1756 for a targetless crime of preparing “poisonous medicines.” In contrast, of the twenty-five male enslaved medical practitioners from the same counties, eight were hanged, nine were whipped and branded, three were whipped, and five were discharged as not guilty. The cases of all five of the men who were discharged occurred from 1790 to 1816—after 1787 only one male medical practitioner was executed: Mat of Cumberland county for “preparing and administering medicine” without a target of harm in 1817. While a more comprehensive collection of gender data from more Virginia counties could strengthen this conclusion, it appears from this data that enslaved men as medical practitioners were both tried more frequently and faced more dire punishments than women; convictions of both dropped in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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13 Trial of Jubelo, Andrew, and Charity, 10 March 1780, LVA Brunswick CCOB, vol. 13, p. 337; Trial of Grace, 26 November 1781, LVA Brunswick CCOB, vol. 13, p. 408; Trial of Susanna, 8 August 1787, LVA Brunswick CCOB, vol. 14, p. 528-529; Trial of Pegg, 26 February 1798, LVA Brunswick CCOB, vol. 17, p. 431. Andrew and Charity were found to be not guilty of the felony crime of “preparing, exhibiting and administering poisonous medicines,” but instead guilty of a “great misdemeanor.” They were each sentenced to twenty lashes.  
15 Trial of Mat, 9 January 1817, LVA Cumberland CCOB, vol. 1815-18, p. 178.
**Table 5.4: Demographics of Black Medical Practitioners in Martinique Poison Cases, 1730-1848**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1730-39</td>
<td>0 (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740-59</td>
<td>21 (30%)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760-79</td>
<td>7 (19%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-99</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-19</td>
<td>3 (5%)†</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820-29</td>
<td>27 (7%)**</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830-48</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61 (11%)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* % of total people accused
† The poison cases I have for this period are only those forwarded to the Ministère de La Marine by Villaret as an illustration of his tribunal. There were many more cases from this tribunal, but these are the only ones that have survived.
** I isolated this decade as the Cour Prévôtale ran from 1822-26 and the first poison cases I have under the new Code Pénal (applied to Martinique in 1828) appeared in 1830

Sources: ANOM Série F3 vol. 244-246; ANOM DPPC Cour d’assises de Fort-de-France and Saint-Pierre, vol. 908-910, 918-922; ANOM Série C8 Correspondance à l’arrivée en provenance de la Martinique (for cases from Villaret’s tribunal, 1806-1808); ADM Série U7 Cour Prévôtale.

Similar to Suriname, though to a lesser degree, the medical practitioners of African descent tried for poisoning in Martinique were mostly male and enslaved. This division was most stark in the 1740s and 50s, during the colony’s eighteenth-century peak of cases. Also like Suriname, the Martinique courts did not consistently provide information on whether the accused were creoles or African born. The cases tried before the Conseil Supérieur in the eighteenth century and the restructured courts of the 1830s and 40s sometimes provided useful regional information. From 1730 to 1774, a plurality of the medical practitioners tried for poisoning first passed through the court in Fort-Royal—covering the central part of the island—with the rest
split between Saint Pierre in the northwest and Trinité in the northeast. All three of the medical practitioners tried on the island from 1830 to 1848 were tried in Saint Pierre. Unsurprisingly, the highest numbers of black medical practitioners were tried during the four years of the Cour Prévôtale. However, they made up only a small proportion of the 368 people tried for poisoning during this acute poisoning panic. Quantitative demographic data on black medical practitioners highlights subtle differences between these four locations, as well as changes over time. However, it also reveals similarities that become even more pronounced in the qualitative information on the strategies and practices of these practitioners.

Black medical practitioners were professionals: they learned their trade, acquired expertise, and were paid for their services. From Virginia to Bahia, slaveholders often relied on black practitioners as white physicians were generally expensive, scarce, and ineffective. Furthermore, slaves specifically sought them out to treat illnesses and solve problems. Their medical knowledge and expertise made them fixtures in colonial medical marketplaces, even when their practices were specifically outlawed.

The connection between vocation and knowledge for medical practitioners of African descent was apparent in the words they and their clients used to refer to themselves. In some cases, specific words from West and West Central African languages referring to professional healer-diviners traveled. Such was the case for Branca, an enslaved medical practitioner from Angola living in Bahia, who called herself a *ganga* and spoke when possessed with the voice of her dead son. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the widespread and very old Proto-Bantu word *

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16 The breakdown of the first trial locations of the thirty black medical practitioners is as follows: 11 Fort-Royal, 4 Saint Pierre, 4 Trinité, 11 unspecified.
18 Denúncia de Branca e Pedro de Sesqueira Barbosa, 14 August 1701, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 81, p. 239-248. James Sweet also discusses this case, see Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 148-149. For more on Angolan feitiçeiros/as in
gàngà, often translated as “expert” or “healer-diviner” had and continues to have specific associations with communications with the dead as the ultimate source of knowledge and power. Writing on eighteenth-century gangas in Luanda, Roquinaldo Ferreira succinctly described them as “the primary conduits to the supernatural world.” The fact that Branca and others who called themselves gangas both used the word and conducted practices as spirit mediums connected to the word’s contemporary West Central African uses indicates the movement, at least in part, of key ideas about who medical practitioners were and how they operated to the western Atlantic.

More often, the idea of learned expertise was phrased in European vernacular terms. While termed empoisonneurs (poisoners) and, less frequently, sorciers (sorcerers) by the courts and their accusers, in Martinique black medical practitioners called themselves savant: people of “great erudition.” In his journal colonial prefect Pierre-Clément de Laussat noted that “savant is the name that they [slaves] give among themselves to these black poisoners. I am not a Savant, they say to say that they are not poisoners.” In Virginia, practitioners often referred to themselves to as “doctor.” For example, two advertisements from the county jails of Charles City and Isle of Wight County printed in the Virginia Gazette in 1774 and 1777 specifically noted that the captured runaway practitioners respectively called themselves “Doctor Dick” and simply “Doctor,” respectively. Terminology was complicated in Suriname: wissiman, possibly derived...
from Dutch wijs for “wise” (i.e. “wise-man”) almost always had a negative connotation but referred to specialists with knowledge of plants and poisons.\(^{25}\) Diviners more often referred to themselves as lukumen (or locomen—spelling in sources varied), a Sranan creole word glossed as “Wiessager” (seer) and “Zauberer” (magician, conjuror) by German missionaries in 1783.\(^{26}\) The 1763 trial of Kwamina, well known to slaves in the area as a “Doctor & Lukkeman,” focused on his secret knowledge of herbs used to treat an enslaved man who had come to him from a different plantation.\(^{27}\) Gramman Quassi, perhaps the most famous and successful medical practitioner of African descent in the western Atlantic, also chose to go by the term “lockoman”—translated by John Gabriel Stedman as “sorcerer” and “sibyl.”\(^{28}\) In the words they chose to describe themselves, medical practitioners of African descent emphasized their knowledge and acquired expertise.

As part of their professional status, whether free or enslaved, black medical practitioners generally received some sort of payment for goods and services rendered.\(^{29}\) This was true both

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\(^{29}\) Trials of black medical practitioners from across the western Atlantic sometimes noted payments for goods and services rendered. As a sampling, see: Procès d’un negre, November 1755, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 405-407; Denúncia de Mariana e Francisca, 18 July 1745, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 106, p. 128; Proces van Schipio van Anka, Apollo, en Jasmijn, 17 July 1770, NADH RVP, vol. 818, p. 51-59. As was often the case, the Virginia country court
for slaveholders who hired them to treat mysterious afflictions—though in cases where the practitioners were enslaved, payment would often be split or go primarily to their owner—and for slaves who sought out their wide variety of services. For example, in Virginia, both Robert Carter and Thomas Jefferson hired medical practitioners of African descent and paid them, in consultation with their owners, in coin. In Suriname, an enslaved medical practitioner named Scaramouche sold substances termed “poison” by the courts to five slaves on another plantation to guard against sicknesses. While coins of some sort were the most frequently noted form of payment, if the form was noted at all, others included bananas, cows, and, in two Suriname cases, strings of “papa gelt”—a form of money associated the Dahomey region, possibly cowrie shells. Free and freed medical practitioners, like Phebe Jackson in Virginia, generally had greater control over their services and charges than those who were enslaved. Jackson kept an account book in the mid-1840s where she meticulously noted who hired her, the names of the afflicted slaves she treated, the treatment, and the charge, crossed out upon receipt of payment. Notably, the year Jackson began her account book—1843—was the same year that the General Assembly of Virginia replaced the 1748 law on “poisonous medicines.” Under the new law it would have still been illegal for Jackson to sell, prepare, or administer medicine to slaves

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32 Proces van La Rocke, 1 February 1741, NADH RVP, vol. 694, n.p.; Denúncia de Branca e Pedro de Sesquira Barbosa, 243; Proces van André, 1 February 1741, NADH RVP, vol. 794, n.p.; Proces van Marquis en Akkra, 27 February 1771, NADH RVP, vol. 819, p. 234-246. Cowries became currency in the Bight of Benin and the Yoruba-speaking interior region during the expansions of the Oyo, Benin, and Dahomey states—they were also powerful objects used in various divinatory rituals. The trial does not specifically state that the “papa gelt” was cowrie shells, but it is a plausible guess. For more on cowries and their use as currency and in rituals, see Akinwumi Ogundiran, “Cowries and Rituals of Self-Realization in the Yoruba Region, ca. 1600-1860,” in Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders, eds., *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic*, p. 68-86. See also Price, *Alabi’s World*, fn. 5 p. 308-309.
33 Account book of Phebe Jackson, 1843-1846, University of Virginia Small Special Collections Library.
without the knowledge and consent of their owners; however, the law now regarded such practices as a misdemeanor rather than a criminal offense. By recording payments and services rendered, it appears likely that Jackson worked within the system of slaveholders’ sanction—or at least only recorded those activities.

Free status also could also give practitioners greater flexibility as to where they conducted their work, although this was not without risk. While enslaved practitioners often had to face the chance of discovery by conducting healing rituals in slave quarters or in the spaces between plantations, free and freed practitioners were sometimes able to set up a private workspace. For example, in the case that headlined this chapter, Paulo Gomes and Ignacia, free and freed medical practitioners, conducted their calundús at a farm Gomes had purchased on the outskirts of the city. However, the relative privacy of a house did not guarantee safety. A large 1766 poison case in Martinique centered on meetings and activities held in the home of a free black man named Jacques Pain, who allegedly orchestrated a series of poisonings. Several decades later, another well-known case in the Bahian Recôncavo consisted of a police raid on a house of free Africans on a tip that they danced calundús. While offering something of a private refuge, centralized practices in private homes or farms could also attract suspicion; a frequently repeated sentiment in denunciations and trials was that everyone in a neighborhood knew where people went for illegal medical practices. Free and freed practitioners of African

34 “An ACT prescribing the punishment of slaves, free negroes and mulattoes for poisoning or attempting to poison, and for selling medicines, and for other purposes,” Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, Printer to the Commonwealth, 1843), 59-60.
35 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 159v. Domingos Álvares, the central figure of James Sweet’s microhistory on black medical practitioners in the Atlantic, also established his own terreiro in Rio de Janeiro upon obtaining his freedom (after he had made his former owner a considerable sum of money from his healing practices). Sweet, Domingos Álvares, 104-105, 126-129.
37 Reis, “Magia Jeje na Bahia,” 67-70.
descent may have had more opportunities and flexibility to conduct their healing practices than their enslaved peers, but fixed locations could increase both success and risk.

Medical practitioners of African descent often became involved in professional rivalries to proclaim their legitimacy and attract clients; such rivalries also increased the risk of one or both practitioners attracting unwanted attention. In diverse colonial medical marketplaces they competed with white European-trained physicians and, particularly in the case of Bahia, Catholic priests sanctioned to treat demonic afflictions with exorcisms. The richest and most detailed documentation of such rivalries comes from the Bahian Inquisition records, but they were not alone.38 It is not a coincidence that in Bahia, several of the initial denunciations that led to an investigation by the Inquisitorial commissioner were made by professional rivals: Dr. Tovar, a white surgeon, in the case of Paulo Gomes and Ignacia.39 While he was not the first to make a denunciation, an Augustinian priest in the rural town of Jacobina vociferously attacked the practices of one Miguel, a slave from Angola, who had treated a white sergeant-major with sorcery after the priest’s exorcism had failed.40 Black medical practitioners also competed with each other. In the case of Paulo Gomes and Ignacia, and unnamed black curador (healer) identified them as the culprits for enchanting a client; in that of Miguel, he himself accused a healer-diviner name Maria Monjola of causing the sergeant-major’s affliction in the first place.41

38 For example, Pablo Gómez’s recent work on black medical practitioners in the seventeenth-century Spanish Caribbean discusses the professional competition between these practitioners and institutions like professional physician’s guilds and the Catholic Church. See also Sharla Fett’s descriptions of several different kinds of rivalries between white physicians and black medical practitioners—particularly female ones—in nineteenth-century Virginia. As discussed in Chapter 3, several treatises from white physicians in the French Antilles discussed and participated in such rivalries. While focused on Saint Domingue, Carol Weaver’s work discusses interactions between white physicians and enslaved healers in detail. Gómez, The Experiential Caribbean, 165; Fett, Working Cures, “Chapter 5 Doctoring Women”; Jean de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique,” 1775, ANOM Série C8b, box 14, f. 4; Rufz de Lavison, Recherches sur les empoisonnements pratiqués par les nègres à la Martinique; Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, “Chapter 2 European Medicine in the Torrid Zone” and “Chapter 3 Enslaved Healers on the Plantation.”
39 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 154.
41 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 158; Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 92v-93.
In addition to professional rivalries, some medical practitioners formed partnerships—as was the case between Paulo Gomes and Ignacia—or master/apprentice relationships. In the 1778 denunciation of Thereza and Luis from the Bahian Recôncavo, multiple witnesses made it clear that Luis, a *crioulo*, had learned divinatory practices and how to speak with “demons” from Thereza, a freed “Gege” (a Brazilian ethnic term indicating that she was from the Gbe-speaking region of West Africa).\(^\text{42}\) Their relationship, which was apparently also a romantic one, lasted for twenty years, their practices “notorious” public knowledge. In Martinique, such master/apprentice relationships were sometimes linked to the relative mobility of marronage. Such was the case for the maroon Zéphir, who was convicted not only of making, selling, and distributing many kinds of *maléfices* and poisons, but also of instructing another man in “his destructive art.”\(^\text{43}\) Evidence from the eighteenth-century Virginia county court records is scarce, as these trial summaries carried few details. Recollections by former slaves on the nineteenth-century period in WPA narratives did describe continuously adapted genealogies of knowledge on plants and healing passed down from individuals to younger apprentices.\(^\text{44}\) While healing may have been a collective enterprise, it was not uncommon for practitioners to learn their vocation as one individual teaching another.

The vocation of being a medical practitioner was so important for some that they took extraordinary risks to continue their practices and pass down their knowledge to others. This risk taking comes through clearly in the case of Jupiter and Gouan, two enslaved men awaiting an appeal trial by the Martinique Conseil Supérieur in late spring 1754. Jupiter was originally tried

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and convicted in Fort Royal for carrying on his person arms, a purse filled with unknown ingredients, and several garde-corps (charms) during his marronage. As capital crimes received an automatic appeal, he waited in the Fort-Royal prison for the Conseil Supérieur to meet. At first, affairs seemed to be improving for him, as his sentence from the lower court of a hanging was commuted in exchange for giving information on others involved in the “distribution of secret drugs.” However, during his trial the council discovered that he had covertly continued to make and sell his “poisons and maléfices” in the prison itself, instructing new apprentices, like Gouan, with his secrets. He showed them how to hide ingredients from the jailers, how to put charms on the jailers and clerks to ensure their “benevolence,” and how to make others that caused “close to sudden death with the extraordinary symptoms” of the “sickness of the blacks who have been poisoned.” The court sentenced Jupiter to be burned alive; for helping him distribute the drugs and charms, his assistant Gouan was hanged. This case was part of a dramatic leap forward in Martinique trials, following legislation that made medical practice by people of African descent a crime in 1743 and the establishment of reduced rules of evidence for poison cases in 1753. In the three months alone when Jupiter was imprisoned twelve other slaves were convicted by the Conseil Supérieur, and six hanged or burned for poisoning crimes. It is highly unlikely that Jupiter would not have been aware of the danger, yet he continued his medical practices in prison anyway. The knowledge, power, and social position—however precarious—attained by being a medical practitioner was, for many, apparently worth the risks.

Knowledge and the accumulation of different kinds of expertise were the keys to black medical practitioners’ power and their ability to offer a wide range of services. One possible

47 Procès de Jupiter et Gouan, July 1754, 252.
48 ANOM, Série F3, vol. 245.
source of knowledge was previous experience in Africa. In the case of Gomes and Ignacia, several of the witnesses referred to Ignacia as the “greater sorcerer” of the two—a “master” *calunduzeira* and “Queen”—and emphasized her connections to Africa as a “Mina.” The idea of African medical practitioners deriving secret knowledge from their countries of origin—having “learned in the land,” as one accusation from a slaveholder in 1743 Suriname termed it—was not unique to Bahia. In an essay on poison and *maléfice* attached to a 1756 case sent to the Minister of the Marine, the Martinique Conseil Supérieur pointed to the knowledge of simples for curing illnesses “used in their counties” as the source for slaves’ poisoning expertise. As discussed in Chapter 3, some slave owners purchased or hired enslaved medical practitioners specifically for their connections to Africa and African healing knowledge.

However, the use of specific African rituals was not restricted to the African-born, nor did African-born practitioners restrict themselves to practices from their region of origin. Focusing only on direct personal links to Africa obscures the myriad ways in which medical practitioners of African descent made claims to knowledge. They appropriated, incorporated, and adapted sources of knowledge in specific local social and botanical environments to solve medical problems, building their reputations and networks of clients on demonstrable

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49 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 155, 156v-157. This term deserves some caution, as “Mina” in Portuguese sources referred to much of the Lower Guinea coastline; without further information, the term does not allow us to pinpoint a region of origin. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 7. For a more detailed exploration of the formation of “Mina” identity, see “Chapter 2 Passages.”

50 Proces van Bienvenue, 13 May 1743, Nationaal Archief (NADH), Oud Archief Suriname: Raad van Politie (RVP), vol. 796. Many of the volumes in this collection are missing page numbers, due to damage on the edges.

51 Procès d’un égre et une negresse, November 1756, Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM), F3 Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry, Compte-rendu des séances du Conseil supérieur de la Martinique et arrets rendus, vol. 245, p. 531-532. For planters like Moreau de Saint-Méry, the connection between Africa, Africans, and secret knowledge was so strong that he claimed a quarter of Africans brought to the Caribbean were sorcerers who had been enslaved in their home countries for poisoning. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l’île Saint-Domingue*, 43.

52 Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*, 56; Denúncia de Pedro Coelho Pimentel, 28 March 1686, ANTT IL 30, vol. 59, p. 135; Processo de Simão, 1688, ANTT IL 28 Processos, f. 8464. Sweet also discusses these two cases in *Recreating Africa*, 165, 120-122.

successes. As part of their efforts to bolster their practice and attract new clients, practitioners like Paulo Gomes worked constantly to build their networks of knowledge.

One major strand in a black medical practitioner’s network was the expertise of other medical practitioners. In the case of Paulo Gomes, one of his neighbors, a fellow pardo stonemcutter who knew Gomes very well, having been co-workers for decades, claimed Gomes frequently attended the *calundús* of others before establishing his own. He described Gomes as constantly seeking out “various black sorcerers to give him fortune.” In the years before Gomes had saved money to purchase both the freedom of Ignacia and a farm where they could conduct their practices, he used to go to Rio Vermello and Itapagipe “to make feitiçaria and dance *calundús*” every Sunday and holy day. Not only did Gomes attend *calundús* organized around the outskirts of Salvador, but he also traveled as far as Pernambuco to visit the houses of other *feitiçeiros*. This detail of one medical practitioner specifically traveling to learn from others stands out among poison trials, but it was not uncommon for practitioners to know one another. As discussed earlier, some practitioners formed master/apprentice relationships to pass on knowledge. Indeed, in Martinique associations between practitioners as part of “secret societies” were highlighted in trials from periods of panic in the early nineteenth century.

Black medical practitioners also incorporated knowledge from European sources into their networks of knowledge. For example, several African practitioners in the Portuguese Atlantic adopted European divination methods like the “scissor and sieve” technique into their

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54 Gómez, *The Experiential Caribbean*, 3, see the entirety of “Chapter 1 Arrivals”; Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomblé*, 2-4.
56 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 159v.
57 Jugement rendu par le tribunal spécial contre des esclaves appartenant aux sieurs Eyma, de Leyritz, Pécout, Chalvet, Fortier, Gradis, Lavener, Serrand, Ducoudray et Valmont accusés d'empoisonnements et de complot d'assassinat contre les économés du quartier, 2 November 1807, ANOM Série C8a, box 115, f. 51; Procès de Médéric et autres, 26 November 1824, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, n.p.
practices. Printed books were also sometimes taken into practice. João Roiz da Silva, the white painter who had been Paulo Gomes’ neighbor and pew-mate for ten years, told the inquisitorial commissioner that Gomes once told him during mass that he had a Castilian book that taught how to make malefícios (sorcery-objects) and their remedies. This was likely the same book that Antonia de Mattos, another of Gomes’ neighbors, described as “um livro de curar, e matar” (a book to heal and kill). Books and other physical pieces of writing could be powerful magical objects and sources of authority in this period. Significantly, Gomes not only sought out the Castilian book as a powerful source of knowledge, but he also advertised his possession of it to a potential client like Roiz da Silva.

For some medical practitioners of African descent, the medical practices and ideas of indigenous peoples were also an important source of knowledge. Indigenous sources are not immediately apparent in poison cases from the slave societies of the western Atlantic, as very few Amerindians were accused or mentioned in the trials. Unlike cases from the Mexico City Inquisition, where defendants of African descent frequently followed a strategy of identifying indigenous sources of knowledge in accusations of witchcraft—sources who could not legally be brought to the Inquisition—black practitioners in the locations for this study did not follow suit. This was even true for locations that did have relatively large Amerindian populations through the eighteenth century, such as Bahia and Suriname. However, there is evidence of exchanges of medical knowledge and interactions between ideas about healing. In Virginia, enslaved medical practitioners learned the uses for many local plants—such as snakeroot,

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58 Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 127-128. For an example in the Inquisition records originating in Bahia, see Denúncia de Rosa Maria Berreira, 29 October 1757, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 120, p. 161-162.
59 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 156v, 158v-159.
61 See Chapter 2 for more details regarding the demographic data.
frequently used to treat poisons—from Amerindian interlocutors. Reporting to the Royal Society from Barbados, English seaman Thomas Walduck described “the observation[s] of Dreams & omens” in conversations between European colonists, slaves, and Amerindians, while a handful of cases from eighteenth-century Suriname involved Amerindians—sometimes living and working alongside African slaves—as suppliers of roots and herbs.

In addition to exchanges of knowledge about specific plants, there is evidence of influences and convergences of ideas about medicine and health that sometimes extended well beyond periods of extensive contact. For example, by the eighteenth century very few indigenous Caribs remained on Martinique. However, in a poison case from 1768 and treatises on poisoning and superstition from 1775 and 1844, the Carib word piaye (sometimes spelled pialle), translated as “shaman who talks to spirits,” appeared in the words of slaves to describe both medical practitioners of African descent and the objects they sold for cures. By the latest of these attestations, the definition of piaye had evolved to include objects sold by medical practitioners of African descent to whites to ensure success in a duel; piayes also often appeared as primary pieces of evidence in the Cour Prévôtale poison trials of the 1820s. The adaptation of this word is particularly intriguing for the conceptual link to communication with spirits as part of medical practice.

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63 Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 280. Virginian snakeroot also became an important part of European pharmacopeias in the Atlantic. See Vigier, *Pharmacopoea Ulyssiponese*, 445-446; Breen, *Tropical Transplantations*, 264; Rutten, Dutch transatlantic medicine trade in the eighteenth century under the cover of the West India company, Appendix V.


65 For more on the history of the relationships between the French, English, and Carib, and particularly the Carib wars and subsequent expulsion from Martinique in the 1660s, see Philip P. Boucher, *Cannibal Encounters: Europeans and Island Caribs, 1492-1763* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).


For many black medical practitioners in the western Atlantic, the greatest source of knowledge and power came from the dead. Practitioners often communicated with spirits through divination practices to diagnose illnesses, determine their root causes, and prescribe the best course for treatment. Adaptations of practices from West Central Africa often involved spirit possession. Generally speaking, ways of contacting the spirit world from Lower Guinea involved fewer instances of spirit possession and more the use of ritual objects for divination. However, healing was the common goal of diverse West and West Central African practices, and many practitioners in the Americas, regardless of their region of origin, bridged differences between them by incorporating, adapting, and creating new elements.

The content divination practices varied, and they were not mutually exclusive. In Bahia, calundú dances in the eighteenth century involved the ritual possession of the practitioner by a member of the spirit world, often indicated by a changed voice and behavior. For example, two women identified as “Mina”—from Lower Guinea—were accused of making cures in 1745 Bahia by speaking in the voices of their deceased sons (interpreted by the denouncer, a white woman, as demonic possession). Several cases of the watermama or Minje mama dance in the Dutch Guianas I discussed in Chapter 4 involved several different divinatory practices. Like calundú in Bahia, watermama was primarily a collective dance where spirits possessed ritually prepared participants for the purposes of public healing—though this dance specifically centered

68 Fett, Working Cures, 56; Sweet, Recreating Africa, “Chapter 6 African Divination in the Diaspora” and “Chapter 7 Calundús, Curing, and Medicine in the Colonial World”; Handlery and Bilby, Enacting Power, 26. For works on the specific context of practices for communicating with spirits in Africa, see Feierman and Janzen, eds., The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa; Gordon, Invisible Agents.
69 Sweet, Recreating Africa, 156-157. See the practices of Domingos Álvares at his terreiro (healing house) in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1730s and early 1740s, Sweet Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World, “Chapter 5 Freedom” and “Chapter 6 The Politics of Healing.”
70 Denúncia de Mariana e Francisca, 18 July 1745, ANTT IL 30, vol. 106, p. 128. For similar accusations of black medical practitioners speaking in the voices of specific deceased individuals, see Denúncia de Pedro Coelho Pimentel, 28 March 1686, ANTT IL 30, vol. 59, p. 135; Denúncia de Branca e Pedro de Sesueira Barbosa, 239-248.
on seeking the aid of a powerful water spirit connected to Ijo practices. In Stedman’s 1796 narrative, he described “watra Mama” as a name used by slaves in Suriname to indicate both a powerful and dangerous “mermaid’ and their “Sybils” who communicated with her. The watermama identified in the 1742 trial of the enslaved man April in Suriname—April himself being tried for purchasing an object to poison others from a medical practitioner at the New Fort Amsterdam construction site—was allegedly an expert in herbs to kill or cure. Conjure doctors in the nineteenth-century United States south also use divination to identify sources of affliction causing “tricks.” Finally, children were an important part of several divinatory rituals. Both the case of Hans in 1819 Berbice and of Jacques in 1767 Martinique had key roles for young girls in identifying the source of illness on respective plantations. In the former, Hans had a nine-year-old girl hold the pot where incriminating evidence against the suspected poisoner suddenly appeared; in the latter, a girl of three was instructed to place a branch of the medicinier tree on the skin of the accused, causing convulsions and a confession to poisoning other slaves.

71 Proces van April, 4 August 1742, NADH RVP vol. 795, n.p.; Complaint against the negro Hans, 60-63. As Randy Browne notes in his article on watermama and obeah in early nineteenth-century Berbice, “minje” was an Ijo word for “water.” Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah,” 463. Brown also discusses the case of Hans in detail, see p. 463-468.
72 Stedman, Narrative of a five year’s expedition (1796), vol. 2, p. 177-179.
73 Proces van April, n.p.
74 Fett, Working Cures, 101-102; Chireau, Black Magic, 50. By 1800, African-born individuals were a statistically insignificant portion of the Virginian enslaved population. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 61.
75 Complaint against the negro Hans, 60, 63; Procès de Jacques, September 1767, ANOM Série F3, vol. 246, p. 408-409. The medicinier tree, jatropha curcas—known in English as the “physic nut” or “Barbados nut,” had an interesting role in Martinique poison cases. In this trial and another from 1755, it was used as part of a ritual to identify a poisoner; in both cases, the text of the trial makes clear that it was the gentle touch of the branch on the skin, not a striking motion, that led to violent convulsions and confession. While the plant is toxic if ingested—and sometimes used as a violent purgative in small doses—it does not cause skin irritation. See Procès d’un negre, January 1755, ANOM Série F3, vol. 245, p. 300; de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique”; Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, vol. 1 87-88. Interestingly, Laussat claims in his journal that “the slaves who can stand up to the most extreme and atrocious tortures beg for mercy and confess everything at a blow from the médicinier applied by a child…it blisters the skin.” However, according to the NIH, cases of poisoning by jatropha curcas are only from ingestion of the plant, especially the seeds. R.K. Singh, D. Singh, and A.G. Mahendrakar, “Jatropha Poisoning in Children,” Med J Armed Forces India 66 (Jan 2010): 80-81, published online at the National Institutes of Health, US National Library of Medicine, 21 July 2011, accessed 5 December 2017, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4920913/
Black medical practitioners were purveyors of a wide range of services for fees, including treating illnesses; making preventative, curative, and aggressive charms; and identifying culprits of suspected poisonings. For example, in 1755 the Martinique Conseil Supérieur convicted one unnamed enslaved medical practitioner, “famous in his neighborhood,” for all three: composing and distributing “drogues malefices” (evil magical drugs) and “pretended remedies” for other slaves who believed themselves poisoned; having “mysterious understandings” of dangerous plants; and discovering poison and poisoners on plantations. At the farm of Paulo Gomes and Ignacia, clients received consultation and treatment through both divinatory practices and the application of particular herbs and objects. None of the seven witnesses from the neighborhood questioned by the commissioner admitted to attending a calundú at the farm, so details on the exact practices involved are scarce. One of Gomes’ neighbors did claim to have once seen Gomes and Ignacia dancing, with her covered in ribbons and white powders—which they also sold at their farm. The white powder is suggestive of pemba, a white clay contemporaneously used in West Central Africa, as well as in two denunciations of Bahian calunduzeiras from 1701 and 1757, to symbolize and enhance contact with the dead. In addition to their divinatory practices, Paulo Gomes and Ignacia also sold therapeutic herbal baths and, on at least one occasion, a small pot with unspecified contents for an enslaved client to leave at a crossroads to ensure the “obedience” of his owner—a form of taming. Practitioners across the western Atlantic made and sold protective amulets—called bolsas da madinga, garde-corps, or simply

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77 Santos, “As bolsas de mandinga no espaço Atlântico,” 205; Sweet, Recreating Africa, 148; Denúncia de Branca e Pedro de Sesueira Barbosa, 242v; Denúncia de Vitoria e outros, 28 June 1757, ANTT IL 30, vol. 120, p. 182.
78 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 157v. For more on taming, see Chapters 3 and 4.
variations on “packet”—to prevent misfortune and help ensure success in life. Medical practitioners were also understood to be capable of causing malevolent afflictions—through *feitiços*, conjure objects, etc.—whether for clients or on their own account. For example, when the enslaved man Toiny sought means to kill Antoine in 1754 Martinique, allegedly out of jealousy, he went to an old enslaved woman who was “a rather ordinary source of murders, and poisonings between these sorts of people.”

Poison accusations directed at medical practitioners of African descent and evidence for trials often centered on the discovery of powerful objects allegedly used in their work. A close examination of some of the described objects recorded in trials uncovers a material culture of medical practice and suggests some of the context of their suspected use. A common element in the kinds of community led public accusations explored in Chapter 4 was the searching of the suspected poisoner’s home. Such searches were often followed by efforts of the accused to explain the uses of suspect items. When the slaves of Andre Gomes de Medina, following a ritual presided over by a famed sorcerer-diviner, searched the cabin of Simão in 1688, they found evidence of sorcery in the form of powders made from snake heads. Simão explained to the Inquisitors in Lisbon that these powders—composed yes of dried snake heads, along with leaves from an “erva de sangue” (herb of health)—were solely for the treatment of snake bites, to be mixed in flour, oil, and garlic and consumed by the patient. While the powders of Simão did

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79 There are many examples of these objects in poison cases. As a selection of such cases involving the makers of these objects, see Denúncia de João e Manoel, 2 March 1758, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 121, p. 6-7; Procès de Jupiter et Gouan, 250-253; Proces van Titus en Dafina, 30 November 1763, NADH RVP vol. 808, n.p.
81 Processo de Simão, 6v-7, 15, 22v-24. Interestingly, Simão cited his formed master, Manoel Madina, as the source of his knowledge for this method of treatment. The Inquisition appeared to have believed his explanation, as they absolved him of the charge of causing death through sorcery.
not appear to have been hidden, many other cases noted concealed locations of practitioners’ supplies and objects: secreted in chests, buried under the floor, or placed in a roof thatching.\textsuperscript{82}

In some cases, the poison or medicine itself was conceived of as a hidden object. Amongst the accusations directed against Paulo Gomes from his Salvador neighbors was the murder of a man named Copme Pacheco—allegedly so Gomes could spend more time with Pacheco’s wife. According to witnesses, Pacheco died from profuse bleeding from the mouth after “catching” the small pot of \textit{feitiços} that had been placed in his door. In another accusation from the same case, a woman accused Gomes of causing the deaths of her slaves by hiding a small pot of \textit{maleficio} in her bed.\textsuperscript{83} Indeed, part of an enslaved practitioner Coffij’s claim to fame at the Suriname New Fort Amsterdam construction site in 1742 was his stated ability to locate and remove all of hidden poison-calabashes—their presence being the cause of illnesses and misfortunes. The testimony at Coffij’s trial did not describe these objects as calabashes (i.e. containers) \textit{of} poison, but referred to the same objects as both calabashes \textit{and} poison (i.e. the hidden objects themselves were the “vergift”).\textsuperscript{84} Such hidden objects could cause afflictions even without physical contact. The surviving fragment of the trial of Quashie in 1731 Suriname focused on a paper packet with herbs, gum, and a root that had been found buried in the path.\textsuperscript{85}

In Martinique, Jean Baptiste confessed in 1766 not only to being part of a network distributing “poisons” around the island, but also to making his owner impotent by hiding a special baton—also purchased from an expert medical practitioner—in the corner of the sugar mill.\textsuperscript{86} In a later case from Suriname, the court tried three slaves for poisoning their owner through

\textsuperscript{82} See, for example: Proces van Goliath en Prins; Proces van Bienvenue; Mémoires de Pierre-Clément de Laussat, vol. 1, p. 71-72.
\textsuperscript{83} Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 154v, 160.
\textsuperscript{84} Proces van Coffij (1742), n.d. Coffij’s claim is similar to that of Hans in 1819 Berbice, who told the court that he could “smell” poison where it was hidden. See Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah,” 478.
\textsuperscript{85} Proces van Quashie, 28 July 1731, NADH RVP, vol. 787, n.p.
\textsuperscript{86} Procès de Jean Baptiste et outres, p. 269.
“superstition”—in this case by burying small bags of coals in the plaza of the house for him to walk over.\textsuperscript{87} Similarly, in nineteenth-century Virginia several overseers reported slaves being afraid to enter plantation yards, as they claimed walking over a conjuror’s buried roots could be enough to conjure or poison them.\textsuperscript{88}

In descriptions of objects associated with and used by medical practitioners, certain materials came up repeatedly as part of a medical “kit” carried in bags, horns, or calabashes. Pablo Gómez’ work on black ritual specialists in the seventeenth-century Caribbean offers a useful framework for thinking about these bags not merely as containers for herbs and objects, but as both “[inventories] of healing and protective substances” and the “amalgamation of knowledge” from a practitioner’s specific experiences.\textsuperscript{89} Practitioners included specific objects of power and developed rituals to use them for specific purposes—to offer protection, for example, from injuries or the malevolent actions of others. In a long 1775 letter decrying the “superstition” of both slaveholders and slaves in Martinique, the Dr. Raymond de Laborde of French Guiana included a detailed, if disparaging, description of the collections of drugs he had seen used in Martinique by enslaved medical practitioners and their uses as explained to him:

[Their drugs are] a mixture of twenty or thirty different drugs inside a box or little sack; each one has their different properties: there are some that otherwise combine in the little bottles, they are human fingernails, the claws of different animals, horsehair, different [illegible], feathers, seeds, roots, leaves, flowers of many trees or plants of the land, [illegible]—possibly coral], red or of other nature. Each of these ingredients had their particular properties. That root is infallible for the bite of such a serpent; the Requeim will touch no one who has been rubbed with such a leaf; this small piece of wood has the property to make such a girl fall in love with the one who carries it. This dirt infallibly cures this sickness. There are those who have talismans with figures, by means of which they become

\textsuperscript{87} Proces van Karel, Datra, en Avans, 22 August 1798, NADH RVP, vol. 859, p. 24-30v.
\textsuperscript{88} Fett, \textit{Working Cures}, 90.
\textsuperscript{89} Gómez, \textit{The Experiential Caribbean}, 140-142. For a recent discussion on the relationships between material culture and rituals by black practitioners, see Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders, eds., \textit{Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic}. 
invisible…others for taking game in the woods, others so they are never discovered when they are maroons.\textsuperscript{90}

While Laborde was clearly mocking his competitors, his inventory offers insights into how black medical practitioners chose and shaped different material objects for specific actions—each with the goal of affecting outcomes in the material world.

While each individual practitioner developed their repertoire from experience, local sources, and local needs, several kinds of materials appeared frequently in both practices to heal and to cause harm. As a word of caution, it is important to remember the limits of using poison trials and investigations here: the objects recorded were only those identified by the slaveholders, courts, or enslaved community as suspicious, and the records for some court systems—the county courts in Virginia being the most egregious—did not always include the kinds of ethnographic details that historians would like. With that said, certain materials came up repeatedly in trials and in more anecdotal evidence. Grave dirt, specifically noted in seven cases, was a way of connecting to the knowledge and power of the dead. Former slaves recalling practices in nineteenth-century Virginia described conjurors using grave dirt and other powerful powders to cause afflictions.\textsuperscript{91} During the early nineteenth-century crises in Martinique, materials from graves and cemeteries played a particularly prominent and detailed role in accusations. One large 1807 case involving forty-two enslaved people across seven plantations near Basse-Pointe, involved an alleged underground network of grave-robbers using the bodies of children from the cemetery to make poisonous powders from their bones.\textsuperscript{92}

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  \item \textsuperscript{90} de Laborde, “Effet dangereux de l’erreur et de la superstition dans les colonies françaises de l’Amérique.”
  \item \textsuperscript{91} Fett, \textit{Working Cures}, 94, 102-103.
  \item \textsuperscript{92} Jugement rendu par le tribunal spécial contre des esclaves appartenant aux sieurs Eyma, de Leyritz, Pécoul, Chalvet, Fortier, Gradius, Lavener, Serrand, Ducoudray et Valmont accusés d'empoisonnements et de complot d'assassinat contre les économes du quartier; 2 November 1807, ANOM Série C8a, box 115, f. 51. See also similar accusation from the 1820s Cour Prévôtale: Procès de Catherine Rosane et outres, 29 August 1822, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, n.p.; Procès de Raimond et outres, 27 November 1823, ADM Série U7, vol. 1, n.p.
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to grave dirt, either through explicit mention or more implicit association. For example, in the 1742 case of Goliath in Suriname, witnesses claimed that he went to the place where slaves were buried in the bush to make his “poison.” Animal horns also appeared in four cases, all but one from Suriname, both for their use in cupping—a widespread medical practice shared by Europeans and Africans in the Atlantic—and as a way to contain and bind other power objects together. One element particularly prominent in the bolsas made in the Portuguese Atlantic was the pedra d’ara, a stone commonly used for love magic. These special stones appeared eight feitiçaria denunciations to the inquisition originating in Bahia and in descriptions of bolsas from Angola to Lisbon to the Bahian Recôncavo with a range of healing and protective purposes. In Bahia, a Catholic colony, pieces of consecrated host from the Eucharist (seven cases), papers with the written names of saints (six cases), and small crosses (eight cases) were also sometimes used as power objects. One of the most famous poison cases in the French Caribbean, that of Makandal in 1758 Saint Domingue, centered on the charge of sacrilege for a tied up power bundle that contained a crucifix. The case of Maria Monjola is particularly interesting, as she

93 Proces van Goliath en Prins.
95 Breen, “Tropical Transplantations,” 178; Mott, Bahia: Inquisição e Sociedade, 106; Calainho, Matropole das mandingas, 95, 98, see the entirety of “Chapter 3 A mandinga de Deus.”
96 Processo de António Rodrigues da Silva, 1725, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 11246; Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 92v-93. Cases considered to be sacrilegious were taken more seriously by the Lisbon Inquisition, and resulted in more full trials. A series of four connected full trials originating in Jacobina—a small town in the Bahian Recôncavo—revolved around the use of a piece of host in a bolsa. The case has been explored by Luiz Mott in detail, see Mott, Bahia: Inquisição e Sociedade, “Chapter 5 Quatro Mandigueros do Sertão de Jacobina nas Garras da Inquisição.” The trial itself is also dramatic and fascinating, as it was interrupted by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. One of the accused, Mateus Pereira Machado (aged sixteen at the time of his arrest), managed to escape his damaged cell in the chaos and pass as a free man. He was re-captured months later has he had been unable to leave the city—orders from the Marques de Pombal had put the city under martial law, strictly forbidding residents from fleeing in the interests of rebuilding as quickly as possible. Processo de Mateus Pereira Machado, 1750-1756, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 1131; Processo de Luis Pereira de Almeida, 1750-1756, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 1134; Processo de João da Silva, 1750-1756ANTT IL Series 28, f. 502; Processo de José Martins, 1750-1756, ANTT IL Series 28, f. 508.
97 One of the most famous poison cases in the Caribbean, that of Makandal in 1758 Saint Domingue, centered on the charge of sacrilege for a tied up power bundle that contained a crucifix. The documentation for the case is in a series of letters, reports, and transcripts of interrogations from 1757 to 1759 compiled together by Moreau de Saint-Méry.
allegedly caused afflictions with a pouch of power objects worn around her neck that included a cross and a caboclo—a figurine connected to indigenous Tupí forest spirits.98 Other common materials included feathers, animal parts, and herbs—usually, and frustratingly, unidentified.

Individual objects of power had specific meanings, but they worked in compositions designed and crafted by medical practitioners. The idea of “tying up,” whose metaphorical implications I discussed in Chapters 1 and 4, was also important in the crafting of power objects. For example, one case from the Bahian Recôncavo in 1754 involved an affliction caused by a branch of an unidentified tree knotted up with a piece of iron; in the case of April in Suriname, mentioned above, the object he purchased and allegedly used to harm others on his plantation was a little stick packed with herbs and tied up with “papa monies” (possibly cowrie shells).99 It was the combination of objects together and associated rituals that held power. In the earliest surviving poison case I have found from Suriname in 1731, the object in question was a calabash containing pieces of a red stone and a bird’s beak—several slaves also reported having seen the enslaved medical practitioner around the grave sites of others and using the calabash to pray to leaves behind his house. The practitioner, Isaac, did not deny owning and using the calabash and its contents, but insisted that it was for medical purposes and never used to cause harm.100 While Isaac had chosen each of the materials in his calabash for specific purposes based on their powerful properties, their healing power was in the composition—and in the words and gestures he used to activate them.

See ANOM Série F3, box 88, f. 212-252. For a recent interpretation of the case and the particular significance of this bundle, see Burnard and Garrigus, The Plantation Machine, 109.

98 Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 92v-93. Today, the worship of Caboclos is a major subset of Candomblé practices in Bahia. See Pares, The Formation of Candomblé, 68; Voeks, Sacred Leaves of Candomblé, 88, 106.


100 Proces van Isaac, 10 May 1731, NADH RVP vol. 787, n.p.
The removal of various objects from the bodies of the afflicted was also a recurring feature of medical practice. While specific practices varied, from Virginia to Brazil there was a shared theme of what Sharla Fett describes as the porous body, “permeable to graveyard dirt, snakeskin powder, and the spiritual forces they contained.”

In one of the earliest descriptions of obeah in Barbados, Thomas Walduck described witnessing an “Obia Negro” in 1712 remove bones, shells, “and such odd things…that I have admired att [sic] it” from the bodies of “bewitched” slaves. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Virginia, a common sign of a conjure affliction was the sensation of something crawling under this skin; the objects removed by conjure doctors often included insects, worms, or small reptiles. Objects expelled from the body, usually referred to with the same term used for a practitioner’s objects—feitiços—appeared in several trials of black medical practitioners originating in Bahia. In the case of Miguel and Maria Monjola, the former removed a long list of objects, alleged placed by the latter, from the bodies of the afflicted. As part of his treatment of the white sergeant-major in his care, Miguel pulled from his body small bones, goat hairs, rags, butterflies, roots, and a small bag of insects. Even when the objects themselves were not specified in testimony, the verb tirar (to pull out, take out, remove) came up frequently to describe the healing action taken by the feitiçeiro/a. Joanna Maria, a free creole living in Salvador, was denounced in 1752 for using certain little pots to pull objects from the bodies of women; about a half century earlier, an enslaved African man named Sebastião was accusing of pulling objects out of the bodies of other slaves, following divination. This theme of drawing physical evidence of sorcery from the

101 Fett, Working Cures, 94.
104 Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 90.
105 Denúncia de Joanna Maria, 11 Jun 1752, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 113, p. 66; Denúncia de Sebastião, 30 April 1698, ANTT IL Series 30, vol. 72, p. 324.
bodies of the afflicted did not appear in the trials I have examined from Martinique and the Dutch Guianas.

The case of Paulo Gomes and Ignacia stands out for the detailed description of the objects expelled by the afflicted and removed by other practitioners as signs of their alleged feitiçaria. One of the afflicted, a white woman and former lover of Gomes, had begun to throw up charcoal, insects, fish spines, and a pig’s tooth—strong indications to her neighbors that she was “enfeitiçada” (bewitched). One of the most detailed descriptions of bodily expulsions and their position in healing practices came from João Roiz da Silva, the white painter. His unnamed wife was dying in the Hospício dos Religiosos de Jerusalem, where they gave her some medicines that had little effect. A slave there told them that the illness was caused by feitiços, and that the doctor’s medicine at the hospital would not work; she was “enfeitiçada,” as evidenced by her swollen chest. They then took her to see some “mediçinas do preto” (black doctors). One of these medical practitioners, who at the time of Roiz da Silva’s testimony had died, proceeded to remove various “filth” from his wife’s body, including fish spines, chicken feathers, lemongrass, and, again, a large pig’s tooth. Roiz da Silva asked the doctor if he knew who had made the malefício; at first he did not, as Roiz da Silva’s wife did not have known enmity with anyone. The practitioner assisted Roiz da Silva in carrying his wife home, and then proceeded to use divination to identify the culprit. He determined that Gomes was the maker of the malefício, and remarked that Gomes was a “bad neighbor.” Roiz da Silva’s wife died shortly thereafter.106

The details of Roiz da Silva’s account points to another key part of black medical practitioners’ vocation: identifying the work of other practitioners. Whether called in to assist with a communal crisis or consulted by an individual, practitioners built an understanding of

106 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 157v-159.
social relationships involved to determine suspects.\textsuperscript{107} It is unclear from the above case whether the unnamed “curador” (healer) assisting Roiz da Silva had asked around the neighborhood before conducting his divination, but it is significant that he did not venture to suggest a culprit before spending some time there. It would not have been difficult for him to learn about Paulo Gomes’ reputation—indeed, Gomes’ success depended on public knowledge of his identity as a powerful medical practitioner to be respected and feared. Conjure doctors in nineteenth-century Virginia conducted similar quiet investigations into personal relationships to accompany their divination and discoveries of “conjure packets”—pouches of power objects causing the affliction—to identify culprits.\textsuperscript{108} It is important that medical practitioners’ discovery, whether genuine or possibly staged, of objects indicative of sorcery in the homes of suspects usually occurred after they had already been identified through public opinion and divination. In the case of Hans in 1819 Berbice, it was only after a period of ritual dancing and communal possession, during which members of the enslaved community identified Frederick as a poisoner, that Hans found a ram’s horn and bones under Frederick’s bed.\textsuperscript{109} In both eighteenth-century Bahia and nineteenth-century Virginia, medical practitioners were considered capable of turning the affliction back on feitiçeiro/a or conjuror who caused it. Roiz da Silva noted that shortly after his wife’s death he received a concerned visit from Paulo Gomes’ mother. She wanted to know whom he had seen in his effort to treat his wife, as she prayed that no malefício had been turned on her son.\textsuperscript{110}


\textsuperscript{108} Fett, \textit{Working Cures}, 101-106. For a detailed description of illness narratives and conjuration, see the entirety of “Chapter 4 Conjuring Community.”

\textsuperscript{109} Complaint agains the negro Hans, 60-63. Pablo Gómez discusses similar “[discoveries] of incriminating evidence” in cases from the seventeenth-century Spanish Caribbean. See Gómez, \textit{The Experiential Caribbean}, 132.

\textsuperscript{110} Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 158v; Fett, \textit{Working Cures}, 106. The idea of taking malevolent power and turning it back on the one who inflicted it was also present in seventeenth-century English witchcraft beliefs. “Witch bottles,” like one found in Virginia that contained pins and nails, were buried to reverse the pain caused by a witch. See Games, \textit{Witchcraft in Early North America}, 39. Archaeological work has also discovered witch bottles hidden in.
The idea that the same medical practitioner could be accused of treating and causing afflictions with sorcery makes sense in the context of an ambivalent conception of power. The power to cure was also the power to harm.  

Furthermore, the separation between what constituted healing and harming could be relative: some practices performed to promote public health could be seen as malevolent to individuals believed to be harmful to that health. For example, an enslaved client might purchase an object to “tame” or pacify his or her owner—an act promoting personal and public welfare from the client’s perspective, but invariably seen as dangerous and often “poisonous” from the perspective of the slave owner if discovered. Medical practitioners of African descent who increased their visibility as powerful individuals capable of both healing and harm also increased their risk of being accused of causing illnesses.

What could success look like for medical practitioners of African descent in the greater western Atlantic? A quick examination of one of the most well known and successful of these practitioners—Gramman Quassi in Suriname—underscores common strategies adopted by Paulo Gomes, Ignacia, and others trying to navigate their profession as healer-diviners. Like Ignacia, Quassi was born in West Africa and had been enslaved for part of his life. Through his skill as a lukuman, he obtained his freedom and was well known for his preventative and therapeutic practices by the 1740s. By the 1770s he was well traveled and famous in the Dutch Atlantic. Over several decades, Quassi had amassed a vast network of clients for his services, particularly

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111 Fett, Working Cures, 40-41; Sweet Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World, 124, 196; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 101-102; Oudin-Bastide, L’effroi et le terreur, 151-152. For more on the theory of medicine in Africa from the pre-colonial period to the present, see Feierman and Janzen, The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa.

112 David, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 951. In the maroon wars of the 1750s, Quassi used his position as a respected practitioner to infiltrate the Saramaka maroons as a spy; having been discovered, he later led Dutch colonial troops into battle. Price, Alabi’s World, 32.
in the creation and distribution of obis, small amulets of ritually powerful objects (shells, hair, feathers, etc.) that offered protection to the wearer. His obis were so popular that almost all of the colony’s black rangers—slaves freed on condition of fighting with the Dutch against the maroons—went to him to buy theirs. Quassi’s clients were not restricted to the rangers: like many other black medical practitioners, he was often hired by white slaveholders and paid handsomely for his services in identifying perpetrators of various crimes on plantations.113

Like Quassi, there were several very successful medical practitioners of African descent who were able to maintain a high profile without finding themselves on trial. Usually, these individuals were recognized by the government for special services performed for the colony in question. Quassi was a key ally of the Dutch colonial government in the 1750s maroon wars, both in his work as a spy and for supplying the black rangers with obis.114 His status within the colony as a powerful and much needed ally was apparently high enough to insulate him from allegations in at least one poison case that he had been a supplier of a packet allegedly used to poison slaves on at Plantagie Pérou on the Cottica river.115 In the early eighteenth-century British North American colonies, colonial authorities manumitted several slaves in exchange for much-desired medical knowledge.116 Many Virginian black medical practitioners worked within the legal bounds of sanction—made possible by the loophole in the 1748 ban on slaves’ medical practice that allowed for such practice with the knowledge and consent of all slaveholders involved.117 Here the limitations of trial records as a source base are apparent, as they capture

113 Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition (2010), 426, 551-552, 582.
114 Price, Alabi’s World, 32.
115 Proces van Coffij en La Rose, 16 August 1779, vol. 836, p. 216.
116 For the story of James Papaw from 1729 Virginia, see Parrish, American Curiosity, 287. A more famous example was that of an African man named Caesar in 1750 South Carolina, who exchanged his cure for poison for his freedom and a lifelong pension. The cure itself—featuring plantains as a main ingredient—appeared in almanacs, newspapers, and kitchen recipe books across the south well into the nineteenth century. See also Morgan, Slave Counterpoint, 625-626.
117 Hening, The Statutes at Large, vol. 4, p. 105; Schwarz, Twice Condemned, 97.
only those medical practitioners who were unfortunate in their risk taking to build networks of clients and knowledge.

Building prestige through networks of clients over a wide geographic area was a common strategy for both free and enslaved medical practitioners of African descent, though the challenges to doing so varied widely with circumstances. Like Quassi, Paulo Gomes and Ignacia actively built a diverse network, offering a wide range of services to a wide range of clients—attendees at their rituals on the farm included “people of all quality.” Gomes advertised his skills to his neighbors, black and white. One “gravely ill” white widow recalled to the commissioner that Gomes, whom she had known for twelve years, as they lived on the same street, had tried to persuade her many times over her long illness that she should come to his farm to be healed; she had declined his offer.118 In Virginia, several runaway advertisements from the eighteenth century described the “great acquaintance,” in some cases in counties across the colony, held by enslaved men who went by “Doctor.”119 Poison trials from the colony’s county courts reveal that many practitioners crossed plantation and county lines to perform medical services and attract new clients. A recurring detail in the otherwise rather limited trial summaries was that black medical practitioners exhibited their wares—making their services and objects used for healing known to potential clients.120 Robert Carter’s letters from the 1780s requesting the services of

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118 Denúncia de Paulo Gomes e Ignacia, 156-157, 159-159v.
enslaved medical practitioners to come treat strange illnesses frequently noted how these practitioners were well-known and specifically requested by the afflicted slaves for their reputation. These requests highlighted the ways in which prestige sustained and expanded a practitioner’s clientele.\textsuperscript{121} The networks of enslaved medical practitioners and their clients in Suriname can be traced like a spider web over the colony’s numerous waterways—the neatly marked plantation boundaries on property maps stopped neither medical practitioners’ reputations, nor their practices.

The cultivation of a reputation and networks of knowledge that were necessary for success in their vocation also put practitioners at higher risk of being accused of causing illnesses through poisoning and/or sorcery. In poison cases across the slave societies of the western Atlantic, a practitioner’s reputation came up frequently as potentially damning evidence or the initial cause for suspicion when people or livestock became sick. Of the ninety-nine surviving poison trials and investigations involving medical practitioners that I have examined from Bahia, Suriname, and Martinique from 1680 to 1849, the court explicitly discussed reputation as evidence in thirty-two—about a third of them.\textsuperscript{122}

Increased visibility from the cultivation of networks could put black medical practitioners at great risk for accusations of poisoning. Three interconnected trials from Suriname in 1741 illustrate well the precarious position of poisoning. Three interconnected trials from Suriname in 1741

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\item 1773, LVA Cumberland CCOB, vol. 1772-74, p. 452-453; Trial of Obee, Dick, and Mary, 29 July 1778, LVA Spotsylvania CCMB, vol. 1774-82, p. 94.
\item Robert Carter to Bennett Neal, 15 September 1781, Bull Run Regional Library (BRRL), Robert Carter Correspondence (RCC), Letterbook 4, p. 117-119; Robert Carter to William Berry, 31 July 1786, BRRL RCC, Letterbook 7, p. 62; Robert Carter to William Berry, 26 February 1788, BRRL RCC, Letterbook 8, p. 88; Robert Carter Pass to Sampson, 31 January 1788, BRRL RCC, Letterbook 8, p. 77. For a Brazilian example of similar practices, see Sweet \textit{Domingos Álvares}, 76.
\item\textsuperscript{122} ANTT IL 30, vol. 55-131; ANTT IL 28; NADH RVP vol. 787-915; ANOM Série F3, vol. 244-246; Archives Départementales de la Martinique, Série U7 Cour Prévôtale. Including Virginia, I have examined 150 cases with black medical practitioners in total. I’ve left Virginia out here because it is hard to tell exactly what was discussed in the Virginia cases; surviving county court records are all brief summaries of one or two paragraphs. In total, cases with medical practitioners made up 29% of the total 515 poison cases I have studied.
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networks of clients, suppliers, and knowledge operated. In the early months of 1741, the Suriname Court of Policy and Criminal Justice began their first examination against La Rocke at Fort Zelandia, overlooking the Paramaribo parade and execution ground. At this meeting, La Rocke either confessed or confirmed an earlier confession made to his owner to having purchased one “poison” (vergift) from Samson to kill three enslaved women on his plantation and another from André to cure the pains in the arm of another enslaved woman working at the New Fort Amsterdam. La Rocke had been identified by several people on the plantation as the one responsible for a series of misfortunes, including the illnesses of the slaves Apollo and Codjo—the former following a confrontation in the capacity of Apollo’s position as the driver, the latter as part of a dispute involving Codjo’s wife. The vergift to kill was a black powder with a little white inside a small cloth bag, that to cure was a red substance packed inside of a horn. La Rocke paid for these items, in the case of the latter specifically with a bundle of bananas and a string of “papa gelt.” When asked for his motives for killing the women, La Rocke cited a personal dispute: during the coffee harvest, he claimed that they had repeatedly taken his coffee away and abused him, resulting in a thrashing each time he returned to the plantation short.

While he insisted in the early examinations that the vergift (in the court’s words) he had purchased from André to “restore” the fourth woman, and not to harm, by his final interrogation he had changed his answer to the court’s repeated questions to say that the red substance was a poison used to kill.

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123 The document is somewhat unclear as to whether the details from La Rocke’s confession emerged first in the court or on his plantation, though it emphasizes that the confession was of his free will and did not cite the legal use of torture.
125 Proces van La Rocke, n.p.
Following La Rocke’s three examinations, the case turned towards André. André, as well as several slaves from La Rocke’s plantation, had been conscripted from his plantation on the Commewijne river to assist with the construction of the New Fort Amsterdam. According to La Rocke’s testimony, André had shown him his red *vergift*, advertising that it would be effective for a year, after which La Rocke purchased the substance. Apparently he was not André’s only client: André confirmed to the court that he had also performed medical services for an enslaved women working at the fort, as well as for a man named Louis—who worked temporarily at the fort, but had the same owner as La Rocke. André confessed, apparently freely, to selling La Rocke the red substance in the horn to treat pains in the hands. He also instructed La Rocke on its use: to be mixed with animal fat and applied externally to the injured limb. However, André strenuously and repeatedly insisted that it was not a poison and not for killing. During André’s fourth examination in early February, the court brought in La Rocke to confront André’s testimony. When La Rocke claimed that André had in fact given him poison to kill, the two men erupted into a heated exchange that ended with André striking La Rocke over the bar.126

La Rocke’s testimony initiated a third case against the enslaved man Samson, though Samson was not convicted until the spring. Unfortunately, only the concluding summary of Samson’s trial has survived, so it is unclear what Samson said in his own defense. According to this summary and La Rocke’s testimony, Samson and a free Amerindian woman—who also lived and presumably worked in Samson’s owner’s house in Paramaribo—were well known as merchants of “pernicious and poisonous herbs,” making and selling *vergift* to slaves working at the New Fort Amsterdam. La Rocke claimed that Samson had showed the poison that La Rocke later purchased to Louis, the man from his plantation who had been working at the fort, indicating that Louis was a further link of information between La Rocke’s Commewijne

126 Proces van André, n.p.
plantation, the fort, and Paramaribo. While the court investigated and acquitted two other slaves suspected of being connected to Samson’s supply network, there is no surviving evidence that Louis was ever tried or arrested. Each of the three trials ended in a public execution in the capitol: La Rocke was hanged, André beheaded, and Samson broken on the wheel. The court ordered the heads of each man to be mounted on a spike in the river as a warning to others.

This series of cases is particularly rich as it touches on many of the common themes of poison cases involving black medical practitioners. Immediately striking is the geographic spread of both the connections between the slaves and the reputations of the medical practitioners. The three enslaved defendants, La Rocke, André, and Samson, had different owners and lived in different parts of the colony—La Rocke on a plantation on the Commewijne river, André on a different plantation on Hooikreek, an offshoot of the same river, and Samson in his owner’s house in the city of Paramaribo. As with several other poison cases from the early 1740s, the construction site of the new fort at the meeting of the Suriname and Commewijne rivers served as a hub. André and Samson were well known at the fort, and all three had developed a reputation for medical services. La Rocke also had a reputation for social confrontations. The exchanged red and black powders, and payments rendered for them, formed additional connections in a medical web that operated largely beyond the knowledge or control of slaveholders. It was along these same lines that accusations of using or selling poison flowed.

While details in the testimony differed—and, in the case of La Rocke, changed over the course of the investigation—these interconnected cases also suggest the multiple roles of practitioners and their practices for healing and harm. La Rocke acquired multiple substances

127 Proces van Tromp en Manuel, 29 April 1741, NADH RVP, vol. 794, n.p. Tromp and Manuel, who were also working at the new fort, had been named by La Rocke. Both they and Samson denied any connection; without further evidence, the court ordered them to be released to their owners.
129 See, for example, Proces van Tromp en Manuel, n.p.; Proces van Coffij, 1 June 1742, NADH RVP, vol. 795, n.p.
from other practitioners, and seems most likely to have used them for distinct purposes. That La Rocke was both a healer, treating pains in a woman’s arm, for example, and the primary suspect for illnesses, deaths, and misfortunes on his plantation, was not a coincidence. La Rocke occupied a precarious position, both morally in the eyes of the enslaved community, and socially as his reputation for power put him at greater risk of accusation. While no one accused André of directly causing physical harm with poison, it was his reputation for medical practice and making and selling medical substances that put him in contact with La Rocke as a client—both widening his network and increasing his risk. From Paramaribo, Samson and his unnamed Amerindian partner also expanded their clientele by selling to slaves at the fort and, through these connections, to slaves on other plantations—again increasing the likelihood that their practices would come before the criminal court. As with medical practitioners in 1750s Martinique, these three men would have been well aware of the risks: while their cases were among the first of the early 1740s boom, heads of slaves convicted of poisoning had adorned the Suriname river outside of Paramaribo for several years before their trials. That these men conducted medical practices at all, despite knowing the risks of poison accusations, and that many more continued to do so long after their public and gruesome executions speaks volumes of the importance to them of their vocation.

There was no clear resolution to the case of Paulo Gomes and Ignacia. Having collected denunciations and testimony from their neighbors over the course of a month, the Inquisitorial commissioner sent the package to Lisbon. It would have been months, possibly longer, before he heard back. As with most accusations of feitiçaria directed at people of African descent, the Lisbon Inquisitors decided the case was not worth the expense and declined initiating a full trial.

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Instead, they neatly copied the documents for the record into the one hundred and ninth volume of the *cadernos do promotor* (prosecutor’s notebooks), and that was that. It is possible that Gomes and Ignacia were brought before the secular court, which had joint jurisdiction over *feitiçaria* cases. Such was the case for the denunciation of Miguel and Maria Monjola; while the Inquisition declined to open a trial, the secular courts were already in the process of trying the two medical practitioners when a dissatisfied neighbor denounced them to the commissioner.\(^{131}\) However, in the absence of surviving documentation, it is impossible to know. While the fates of Gomes and Ignacia are unknown from this record, many other poison trials of medical practitioners of African descent ended with concrete finality. For La Rocke, whose head the Suriname court mounted on a pike in the Suriname river; or Jupiter, whose body the Martinique court burned at the stake; or Dido, an enslaved man whom the Virginia Cumberland county court hanged in 1756 for making and distributing “poisonous medicines,” the risks of conducting medical practice were very real, the results dire.

It was an irony that the strategies used by eighteenth-century black medical practitioners to become successful—courting new clients, expanding networks of knowledge, building reputations for power and prestige—increased their risk of accusation from slaveholders, slaves, or other practitioners. Medical practitioners of African descent built their professions on knowledge and the accumulation of different kinds of knowledge: from methods of contacting the dead to the use of power objects proven through experience to the social knowledge necessary to identify the work of other practitioners. It would have been difficult for them to have been unaware of the risks of their work, especially during the mid-eighteenth-century peaks of poison trials; yet they continued their practices and continuously worked to expand them. To

\(^{131}\) Denúncia de Miguel e Maria Monjola, 94. This detail was noted in the commissioner’s file. However, few secular court records from the eighteenth century have survived.
be a medical practitioner of African descent in the western Atlantic—whether a *savant*,
calunduzeiro/a, lukuman, or simply “doctor”—was to hold a vocation, however precarious, of
power and prestige. Many paid for that power with their lives.
CONCLUSION

“Poison” is as much an idea as it is an action. Neither is timeless or universal. Ideas about poison and the relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery changed over time, and contemporary actors in poisoning events had different interpretations of what they experienced in the same historical moment. This dissertation has explored poisoning cases from the perspectives of slaveholders, slaves, and black medical practitioners, tracking long-term changes in ways of discussing poison along with trials as sites of both the evolution of these ideas and the consequences thereof. The implications of this thesis go beyond a greater understanding of the phenomenon of poison cases. The contested ideas about medicine and sorcery revealed through poison trials show how the ideas of Africans in the Atlantic world had an impact that transcended imperial boundaries, shaping convergences across very different locales. Even in the extreme disparity of power between slaveholders and slaves, the concerns, hopes, fears, and dreams of Africans and their descendants—and the actions they took to improve their lives—had an enormous impact on the relationships, lives, and laws of people in the slave societies of the western Atlantic. We can not hope to understand the Atlantic world without understanding the role of Africans in shaping it.

People from Western Europe, West Africa, and West Central Africa had developed different idioms and ways of understanding the relationships between poison, medicine, and sorcery. They carried these ideas with them and adapted them to new circumstances in the slave societies of the western Atlantic. At the same time, people in the eastern Atlantic continued to transform their own ideas. Europeans in the early modern period had developed a discourse of poison as a “weapon of the weak,” a tool used to usurp power from the powerful. It was a gendered crime linked to women or “womanly” men. In contrast, people in West and West
Central Africa in the early modern period built their discourse of poison around the idea of poison as an abuse of power committed by the powerful. Practitioners and rulers—and rulers as public healers—could be dangerous, “poisonous,” threats precisely because they were powerful. This thesis has examined the circulation of ideas in the Atlantic basin as necessary for understanding poison cases. If we approach these cases only through the lens of resistance—of slaves using poison as a “weapon of the weak”—then we risk missing the more complex picture of how different people involved in these cases saw and understood them.

Examining poison laws created by white colonial officials and the trials conducted under them in slave societies of the western Atlantic from a wide angle reveals a shared history, with similar patterns same patterns of emergence, growth, and decline from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries across very different locations. Early incidents rose in tandem with the boom of plantations and the acceleration of the transatlantic slave trade that violently dragged Africans into slave societies as worlds of extreme violence and insecurity. Through a feedback loop of accusations originating on plantations, trials in colonial courts, and public discourse among slaveholders and colonial officials, these cases expressed and created an idea of poison centered on the sorcery practices of black medical practitioners. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this relationship began to dissolve as courts—sometimes strongly opposed by slaveholders—became increasingly skeptical of “superstition” as poison. While this decline did not mark the end of poison trials, or the end of beliefs in sorcerous poisonings connected to medical practitioners of African descent, it did end the link between the two.

While the particular relationship between poison, medicine, and sorcery had been remarkably stable for decades, slaveholders, slaves, and black medical practitioners understood it in very different ways. Slaveholders primarily interpreted poisoning events through an idiom of
usurped power. They responded with a profound need to reassert a control that may have never been as complete as they had thought. As slaveholders dominated courts and legislatures during the emergence and peak decades of poisoning cases, their concerns shaped laws and the prosecution of these cases. They tried to police the activities of free and enslaved medical practitioners of African descent in a variety of ways: from bringing practitioners to court to torturing individuals on their plantations to establishing control over medical practices and ritual activities through permission or even participation. They found ways to make poisoning events knowable by incorporated them into their own frameworks for understanding the world—even when the details of elaborately constructed pieces of “common knowledge” often did not reflect details from actual cases. They constructed this discourse through conversations with each other and with outside observers. While the language and contours of slaveholder discourse on poisoning changed from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the central problem of control—both physical control over slaves and conceptual control through creating knowledge about poison—was a constant.

Slaves were also concerned with powerful medical practitioners of African descent, as they both sought and feared their practices. Accusations against these practitioners originating within enslaved communities were intertwined with slaves’ struggles to manage their own medical treatment and take control over their lives. Members of enslaved communities primarily interpreted sorcerous afflictions and cures through a relational lens; healing and identifying the causes of harm involved relationships to both the living and the dead. Slaves had active roles in instigating and participating in poison investigations, and in some cases brought their investigations to slave owners. In the early nineteenth century, enslaved communities increasingly conducted investigations of suspected poisoners in secret as courts began targeting
accusations of malevolent sorcery as themselves dangerous “superstitions.” By looking closely at the expressed ideas of slaves—as clients seeking power objects for a variety of purposes; as afflicted patients seeking treatment; as accusers and witnesses seeking justice—we can see poison accusations as community events filled with tension and mapped on webs of fraught relationships.

Desired and dreaded by slaveholders and slaves, fully trusted by neither, medical practitioners of African descent walked a thin and very dangerous line between success and disaster—between the prospect of prestige and possible arrest, torture, and/or gruesome execution. Their practices and the strategies they used to build their reputations of power contributed to both. They were professionals and presented themselves as such, deriving their power through expansive knowledge. As purveyors of a wide range of services for fees—including divining cures; treating illnesses; making preventative, therapeutic, and aggressive charms; and identifying the handiwork and culprits of suspected poisonings—free and enslaved practitioners worked continuously to build networks of knowledge and clients. The same reputation, visibility, and expertise that they cultivated to attract and maintain clients also made them more exposed and vulnerable to denunciations.

Avenues for future research abound. The scope of this study was built around the trials, which, with very few exceptions, did not include people identified as Amerindians. Yet indigenous knowledge and ways of understanding medical practice—like the *piayes* in Martinique—shimmer around the edges of this project. Furthermore, histories of slavery in the western Atlantic have shown the importance of indigenous slaves to the formation and
development of these empires and slave societies. How did ideas about poison, medicine, and sorcery among different Amerindian societies in the Atlantic world change over time, and in what ways may they have impacted the ideas expressed in poisoning trials from which they were absent?

Representation in literature and works of popular culture offer another potential angle for analyzing poison cases. How did the imaginary of poisoning on both sides of the Atlantic change over time? How were these poison cases reported in newspapers or referenced in plays, novels, and printed pamphlets? Understanding the literary imaginary of poisoning can lead to both a greater understanding of the wider impact of these cases and greater insight on how representations in popular culture altered ways of thinking about poison.

The transatlantic slave trade was not the only factor in the movement of Africans in the western Atlantic; the internal circum-Caribbean and domestic slave trades also contributed to serial dislocations. In several of my cases and anecdotal sources I found scattered evidence of slaveholders—and sometimes courts—selling suspected enslaved poisoners to other colonies. Sometimes the cases of free people of African descent, like that of Marie Rose Manuel, who was accused of using *maléfice* in 1752 Martinique, also ended in banishment. While historians have examined banishments from trials in the Cour Prévôtale and the resulting legal battles in the metropole, the potential impact of banishment and sale on eighteenth-century poison cases remains unexplored. In at least one instance, that of an enslaved man named Quacoe accused of poisoning in Suriname and sold by his owner to a slaveholder in Boston—where he was tried again for poisoning in 1761—the forced movement of a suspected poisoner occurred across

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3 Savage, “‘Black Magic’ and White Terror.”
imperial lines. Where did people sold or exiles for poisoning go? How did the movement of free and enslaved people of African descent—especially those accused of poisoning—between colonies impact the spread and development of ideas about poison?

Atlantic historians interested in the possibilities of historical linguistics for creating deep scale intellectual histories and producing insights can also adopt this method into their work on a wide variety of subjects. It is my hope that this study will serve as a springboard for others to ask new questions and take my interpretations in new directions. If historical linguistics and yield insights on how Africans thought about the relationships between poison, medicine, and sorcery, what other aspects of their lives and experiences could this method help historians understand?

At the opposite end of the spectrum, an investigation of poison cases has opened up possibilities for thinking about micro and local scales of analysis. From the streets of Salvador to the temporary construction camps at New Fort Amsterdam, the poison trials I uncovered revealed intimate stories of neighborhoods and networks. Future studies could make excellent use of poison trials—with their fraught relationships and life and death hanging in the balance—as a window into these social histories and how they changed over time.

The conclusion that “poison” meant different things to different people at different times—that the “taken-for-granted must cease to be so”—is not merely a curious detail from the past. The differences in how people in the Atlantic world saw and interpreted “poison” and its relationship to medicine and sorcery were matters of life and death. Poison was connected to central concerns of life: to securing the well being in this world of oneself and one’s relatives; to

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4 Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 12-13. I have been unable to find Quaco’s original Suriname trial, as most of the volumes for the 1750s have not survived.

following a vocation that gave one power and meaning; to the complex and fraught relationships that bound people together. “Poisoned relations” shaped the lives of thousands.
APPENDIX A: HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Creating an ‘archive’ through historical linguistics has four major components: building a classification of related languages; determining each language’s regular sound change rules; building a lexicon of words connected to roots of interest; and constructing the histories of roots based on differences in vocabulary web. In essence, there are really two steps: the processing of linguistic data and the interpretation of that data. Languages have ‘genetic’ relationships to each other that can be mapped out in a classification. A key principle is that, over extended period of time, languages split by a method similar to cellular mitosis into two (or more) daughter languages that share grammatical cores, with the “mother” (or proto-) language then ceasing to exist. One can therefore derive roots in protolanguages by looking at shared roots in branches of the language family tree. Linguists use several methods to determine whether and how two languages are related, including lexicostatistics (calculating the shared percentage of cognates from core vocabulary lists), the comparative method (examining possible cognates through regular sound correspondence rules), and a new phylogenetic classification method developed in the last decade that uses computer modeling. Regular sound correspondence follows the principle that within each language sound changes follow consistent rules. For example, the proto-Bantu root *bantu (meaning ‘people’) became over time the Swahili word watu and the

1 Ehret, History and the Testimony of Language, 13.
2 Historians using historical linguistics often combine lexicostatistics—which is the fastest method but has flaws—with analyses of grammar and common innovations in the comparative method. For example, see Vansina, How Societies Are Born; de Luna, Collecting Food, Cultivating People. For an example of the new phylogenetic classification, see Gilles-Maurice de Schryver et. al., “Introducing a state-of-the-art phylogenetic classification of the Kikongo Language Cluster,” Africana Linguistica 21 (2015): 87-162. This team’s work was part of the Kongo King interdisciplinary research project that included historians, linguists, and archaeologists. For historical linguistic works that have come out of the new classification in this project, see Jaspar De Kind, Gilles-Maurice de Schryver, and Koen Bostoen, “Pushing Back the Origin of Bantu Lexicography: The 'Vocabularium Congense' of 1652, 1928, 2012,” Lexicos 22 (2012): 159-194; Koen Bostoen, Odjas Ndonda Tshiyayi, and Gilles-Maurice de Schryver, “On the origin of the royal Kongo title ngangula,” Africana Linguistica 19 (2013): 53-83; Koen Bostoen and Gilles-Maurice de Schryver, “Linguistic innovation, political centralization and economic integration in the Kongo Kingdom: Reconstructing the spread of prefix reduction,” Diachronica 32, no. 2 (2015): 139-185.
Gikuyu word *andū*—“b” softened to “w” in one branch while disappearing entirely in another.\(^3\)

By determining the regular sound changes for languages and their proto-languages and mapping them onto the ‘frame’ of the classification—often drawing from the work of linguists engaged in this data processing—historians can then start to track and interpret the implications of changes in roots over time.

The next step requires amassing as many attestations as possible in as many languages within the language family as possible around the idea(s) of interest. For my research, after an initial round of sampling to find about a dozen roots relating to poison, medicine, and sorcery, I pulled every word I could find containing these roots from dictionaries for twenty-nine currently spoken languages in the Njila family (extending over much of modern Angola, as well as parts of Namibia, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the Kikongo Language Cluster. In doing so, I created a data set of over 2,500 words. I also tracked attestations of the root words in Bantu languages and protolanguages outside of the Njila and KLC families, using used the new model of the spread of Bantu languages from Rebecca Grollemund et. al., to more accurately determine the antiquity of root changes and meanings\(^4\). These included David Schoenbrun’s work reconstructing Great Lakes Bantu, dictionaries of Douma and Teke (respectively from the B50 and B70 groups, which shared a common ancestor with the KLC), and Jan Vansina’s work on Equatorial Bantu—an older branch that shared a common ancestor with KLC, Njila, and Great Lakes Bantu.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Ehret, *History and the Testimony of Language*, 28–29.

\(^4\) Grollemund et. al., “Bantu expansion shows that habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersals.”

I was then able to conduct my analyses on distributions of meaning—both inherited and borrowed from geographically proximate neighbors—and grammatical forms to build my root word histories. To reconstruct word meanings, I relied upon prototype theory: the idea that semantic domains are like concentric circles, with a central core meaning, amplifications, and elaborations. By exploring the relationships between words and their surrounding vocabulary—both horizontally, through similar words contemporaneously spoken, and vertically through the reconstructed linguistic chronology—one can track how a word has changed over time and the context in which some words may have been borrowed.

A key part of this analysis involves the identification of loan words, usually through breaks in regular sound change rules. These loan words offer historical insight on the relationships between speakers of different languages. Different kinds of borrowing suggest different kinds of relationships. At one extreme, the borrowing of a single word from another language points to the probable conclusion that the item indicated by the word was adopted: for example a new kind of tool. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the borrowing of a large group of words at once could indicate the assimilation of a group people of one language into another.

Politics of prestige and influence can also result in borrowing well beyond the geographic area of speakers of a language; for example, there is evidence of speakers of languages outside of the borders of the Kingdom of Kongo borrowing prestigious Kikongo words in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By reconstructing the histories of my root words and weaving them

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7 Ehret, *History and the Testimony of Language*, 82-104.

together, I was able to create a roughly two-thousand-year history of ideas on poison, medicine, and sorcery in West Central Africa.

Historians constructing these word histories have used them to analyze a wide variety of topics: any subject discussed by speakers of human languages has the potential to be analyzed using this method. By building archives of reconstructed words, historians have been able to track interactions between groups over time and explore what people talked about; or, in David Schoenbrun’s words, “what people knew how to do and how they thought about their world.”9 Changes in vocabulary related to crops or technologies, for example, can reveal changes and adaptations in agricultural practice.10 While the early works of historians using historical linguistics—pioneered by Jan Vansina and Christopher Ehret in the 1960s—focused on population movements, technologies, and political organization, in the past twenty years historians have taken the field in new directions by applying this method to metaphysical questions.11 New works focused, for example, on ideas about motherhood and fame relating to skilled hunters, show the possibilities of using historical linguistics to track abstract ideas.12 My work on concerns about health and healing contributes to this turn.

Historical linguistics has important limitations that need to be kept in mind when assessing historian’s interpretations built from using this method. Many of the societies that Africanists are interested in were orally based until the late nineteenth century—for many regions, though there are exceptions, there are few if any historical documents that linguists can concretely ‘pin’ meanings to the way that philologists can for other language families with

10 For an example, see Fields-Black, *Deep Roots*.
11 For examples of classic works, see Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*; Ehret, *An African Classical Age*.
written documents. The degree of certainty for conclusions is therefore different and should be considered accordingly.

The time scale offered through historical linguistics is also different than what would be possible with datable documents. Historians often combine their linguistic data that has relative chronology with archaeological and climatological evidence to more accurately situate word changes in absolute time. A complementary, though contested, method called glottochronology can also be used to attach protolanguages to approximate date ranges on a scale of centuries or more. This method is based on the linguistic principle built from studies of historically documented language families from around the world that language changes follow recurrent patterns. While Vansina used glottochronology in his 1990 study of political change in central Africa, he has since rejected the method and argued that it assumes too much on the rate of change to be reliable. However, in its defense, Ehret and others who use it have stressed that this method does not claim that languages change at the same predictable rate over time, but rather that the accumulation of random changes in individual words in the aggregate creates patterns. Several historians have demonstrated the method’s efficacy by matching and corroborating rough linguistic dating with independently derived dates from archaeological work. Even with glottochronology, the time scales—especially in the deeper past—are much looser than historians working primarily with documents may be more comfortable with. In my work on the Njila languages in Chapter 1, I include several rough date ranges for the major

language splits taken from both the previous work of scholars on both linguistic change and archaeological evidence.¹⁸

**Kikingo Language Cluster and Njila Classification Trees**

The KLC classification is from de Schryver, Gilles Maurice et. al. “Introducing a state-of-the-art phylogenetic classification of the Kikongo Language Cluster” *Africana Linguistica* 21 (2015): 87-162. The Njila classification tree is taken from Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa Before 1600* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004). For both trees, I have only included the languages I worked with, not the full collection of languages in the classification. Languages spoken today are in bold text.

**KIKONGO LANGUAGE CLUSTER**

1. Proto North Kikongo
2. Proto South, Central, East, West Kikongo
   a. South, Central, East Kikongo
      i. H16 Kikongo
   b. West Kikongo
      i. H16d Kikongo-Fiote
      ii. H12 Civili

**NJILA**

Proto-Njila

1. Northern Unit
   a. Kwilu
      i. H40 Mbala
      ii. L10-L20 Group
         1. L11 Pende
         2. L101 Sonde
         3. L12 Holo
   b. Kwanza
      i. H20 Group

1. **H21 Kimbundu**
2. **H23 Libolo**
3. **H22 Kisama**
   ii. **H24 Songo**
   iii. **Hb Mbuí**
2. **Southern Unit**
   a. **Eastern**
      i. **Lunda Block**
         1. **Nuclear Rund Group**
            1. **L53 Rund**
            2. **L51 Sala**
            3. **Ld Mpasu**
            4. **L21 Kete-Ipíla**
      ii. **Moxico**
         1. **Northern Moxico**
            1. **K14 Lwena**
            2. **K11 Cokwe**
         2. **Southern Moxico**
            1. **K13 Lucazi**
            2. **Ka Nyemba**
            3. **K17 Mbwela/Nkoya**
            4. **K12b Ngangela**
   b. **Kunene**
      i. **Umbundu-Okavango**
         1. **Umbundu**
            1. **R11 Umbundu**
         2. **Okavango**
            1. **K33 Kwangari**
            2. **K332 Dciriku**
      ii. **Cimbebasia**
         1. **Nyaneka-Nkhumbi**
            1. **R13 Nyaneka**
            2. **R14 Nkhumbi**
         2. **Kwanyama Branch**
            1. **R21 Kwanyama**
         3. **Herero Branch**
            1. **R31 Herero**
APPENDIX B: DATA ON THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

The following tables are of data obtained from *Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*.

Table B.1: Number of Africans Disembarred, 1580-1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Bahia</th>
<th>Dutch Guianas</th>
<th>Martinique</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1582-1590</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1601-1610</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1611-1620</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1621-1630</td>
<td>1,189</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1641-1650</td>
<td>4,094</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1651-1660</td>
<td>1,130</td>
<td>1,795</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1661-1670</td>
<td>1,193</td>
<td>3,088</td>
<td>3,532</td>
<td>1,676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1671-1680</td>
<td>5,121</td>
<td>5,294</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>1,182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1681-1690</td>
<td>11,540</td>
<td>10,703</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1691-1700</td>
<td>42,562</td>
<td>9,788</td>
<td>2,084</td>
<td>7,562</td>
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<tr>
<td>1701-1710</td>
<td>47,973</td>
<td>9,986</td>
<td>5,556</td>
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<td>1711-1720</td>
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<td>7,976</td>
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<td>12,385</td>
<td>20,393</td>
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<td>17,926</td>
<td>15,328</td>
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<tr>
<td>1741-1750</td>
<td>86,916</td>
<td>17,984</td>
<td>21,357</td>
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<tr>
<td>1751-1760</td>
<td>70,111</td>
<td>27,736</td>
<td>18,113</td>
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<td>1761-1770</td>
<td>63,026</td>
<td>41,675</td>
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<tr>
<td>1771-1780</td>
<td>74,141</td>
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<td>1781-1790</td>
<td>76,989</td>
<td>5,702</td>
<td>1,992</td>
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<tr>
<td>1791-1800</td>
<td>90,709</td>
<td>10,637</td>
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<tr>
<td>1801-1810</td>
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<td>17,937</td>
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<td>1811-1820</td>
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<td>1841-1850</td>
<td>27,780</td>
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### Table B.2: Number of Africans Disembarked from Bight of Benin, 1680-1750

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bahia</th>
<th>Dutch Guianas</th>
<th>Martinique</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1681-1690</td>
<td>8,826</td>
<td>3,714</td>
<td>1,329</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1691-1700</td>
<td>29,168</td>
<td>4,884</td>
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<tr>
<td>1701-1710</td>
<td>43,292</td>
<td>5,963</td>
<td>3,145</td>
<td>315</td>
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<tr>
<td>1711-1720</td>
<td>44,822</td>
<td>6,449</td>
<td>7,874</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>52,223</td>
<td>4,123</td>
<td>12,595</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1731-1740</td>
<td>50,475</td>
<td>6,295</td>
<td>8,582</td>
<td>380</td>
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<tr>
<td>1741-1750</td>
<td>48,361</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>8,666</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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### Table B.3: Number of Africans Disembarked from West Central Africa, 1680-1750

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bahia</th>
<th>Dutch Guianas</th>
<th>Martinique</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1681-1690</td>
<td>1,296</td>
<td>5,095</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1691-1700</td>
<td>7,773</td>
<td>4,451</td>
<td>500</td>
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<tr>
<td>1701-1710</td>
<td>1,471</td>
<td>2,568</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>92</td>
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<td>1711-1720</td>
<td>9,060</td>
<td>1,202</td>
<td>2,051</td>
<td>146</td>
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<tr>
<td>1721-1730</td>
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<td>1,450</td>
<td>5,455</td>
<td>1,116</td>
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<tr>
<td>1731-1740</td>
<td>30,110</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>3,367</td>
<td>2,966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1741-1750</td>
<td>35,541</td>
<td>9,095</td>
<td>6,361</td>
<td>640</td>
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</table>

### Table B.4: Number of Africans Disembarked from Gold Coast, 1680-1750

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bahia</th>
<th>Dutch Guianas</th>
<th>Martinique</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1681-1690</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1691-1700</td>
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<td>453</td>
<td>305</td>
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<td>1701-1710</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>482</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
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<td>1711-1720</td>
<td>3,138</td>
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<td>419</td>
<td>391</td>
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<td>1721-1730</td>
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<td>1,199</td>
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<tr>
<td>1731-1740</td>
<td>1,206</td>
<td>11,097</td>
<td>1,656</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1741-1750</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,785</td>
<td>2,768</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table B.5: Number of Africans Disembarked from Bight of Biafra, 1680-1750

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bahia</th>
<th>Dutch Guianas</th>
<th>Martinique</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1681-1690</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>1,125</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>174</td>
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<td>426</td>
<td>4,559</td>
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