

World History Commons - Analyzing Inquisition Documents Full Transcript

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1. What is this document? (3:11)

This document is the proceedings of an Inquisition case brought against a woman, or a girl, who was 14 years old in 1659. And the blasphemy she was accused of committing was the crime of renouncing God. This was a fairly common crime that blacks and mulattoes were accused of. This woman was a mulatta, the child of a white and a black.

In these cases blacks and mulattoes who were slaves or servants were being beaten. And they knew that if they renounced God, which was a crime, the beating would theoretically have to stop and they would be brought to the Inquisition thereby giving them some respite from the beating. So what often happened is an owner or a master would come in and say “my slave did this horrible thing—he or she renounced God”. Scholars have argued that this was a strategy to get the beating to stop and to get a hearing at the Inquisition.

This 14 year old girl was named Gertrudis de Escobar. She was actually a free mulatta servant in a convent. She was brought to the Inquisition by her mistress, Juana de la Cruz, who was a nun. She had heard that there was a possibility that Gertrudis was thinking of running away, so her mistress was punishing her.

One of the reasons that it is possible for people to kind of get their stories out at the Inquisition is because they ask these open-ended questions. You have to respond to each of the accusations in detail. What’s interesting about this case is that she doesn’t get browbeaten into rolling over and saying “I’m guilty”.

The proceedings were secret and so she was asked if she knew why she was brought to the Inquisition. She didn’t know, so the charges were read to her. She had claimed that many of the charges were false. She agreed that she had renounced God, but claimed that she had been forced. She was convicted and sentenced to an *auto de fe*, which is a public reading of her crime. She was paraded through the streets in public humiliation and this is a fairly common punishment. Often cases end here.

This case is interesting because then there’s this other letter from a cleric written in 1662, two

years after the initial case. He tells the story of what happened to Gertrudis after the case was over. Generally you don't know what happens. But what happened to Gertrudis was, she was sold by her aunt and her cousins to an *ingenio*, a sugar mill, even though she was free, to pay off the money that she owed the Inquisition. People had to stay in the secret jail of the Inquisition during the time of their trial and they ate and sometimes they had medicine. She owed 19 pesos by the time the case was over.

She was put to work in the sugar fields, which was difficult work. She was beaten a number of times; she tried to run away. She suffered all these indignities and kept trying to prove over and over again that really she was free. That it was illegal really to sell her into the sugar mill. Finally, in 1662, she went to this cleric and appealed to him and said please bring my case to the Inquisition, explain to them what happened, explain to them that I was sold illegally, really that I shouldn't have been sold. And so what happened to her after the case was over comes from this letter written by this priest that ends up in the Inquisition.

Gertrudis was eventually freed. She had to go back to an *ingenio* and continue to work for a while and then the inquisitors decided that she was to be freed. She was not a slave so she couldn't be owned by anybody.

Sometimes owners or masters bring their slaves to the Inquisition for renouncing because somebody else heard them, to save face. But maybe if it happened in private, you wouldn't bring your slave to the Inquisition because people spent a long time in the jails of the Inquisition. Juana de la Cruz did not have access to her servant Gertrudis for over two months. So there's not necessarily a big payoff for bringing your slave to the Inquisition.

2. What was the Inquisition? (2:50)

The Inquisition was a tribunal that was created to maintain the purity of the Christian faith. People who committed crimes against Christianity were brought to the Inquisition. In the late 15th century, the Pope gave Ferdinand and Isabel, the Catholic monarchs of Spain, the right to have an Inquisition. They were concerned about the heresies of Judaism, Protestantism, and Islam. They were also concerned with blasphemies, lesser crimes like bigamy, taking God's name in vain, witchcraft.

By the time the Inquisition got to Mexico in the early 16th century, shortly after the Conquest, really it wasn't as concerned with these heresies but more concerned with these lesser blasphemies. And the Inquisition in its final form in Mexico was established in 1571. Before 1571, the Inquisition was run by clerics and Indians were under the jurisdiction of the

Inquisition. It was decided that the punishments being meted out to Indians were way too harsh. A separate tribunal was established for Indians and so this new Inquisition was established to deal with Spaniards, blacks, mulattoes. You can only be brought to the Inquisition if you're a Christian—so [it's] Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity. But there were doubts about whether they had really converted. They took blasphemy seriously.

Sometimes the Inquisition is much more energetic about prosecuting people than at other times. When somebody is brought to the Inquisition, money and property was confiscated to pay for the time spent, and the food, and the medicine when the person was in jail. Some people have argued that inquisitors considered this a money making venture and that this is why cases against slaves and servants often didn't go to a full trial. Inquisitors were less interested in those people because they could get less stuff from them.

A slave would stay a slave, so that status wouldn't change. There are a few cases in which slaves were sent to other masters or where the Inquisition mandated that a slave be sold because they decided that the punishment was unnecessarily harsh. There's a case where the Inquisition mandated that the treatment be better, sent the slave home, and the slave ended up being beaten to death.

The way that many people frame these cases is that it's resistance. Slaves and servants were using the Inquisition as a forum where they could complain about this terrible treatment. But ultimately, they really didn't have very much power. In Gertrudis's case, her family sells her to an *ingenio*, so it's not like their lives were markedly improved by this visit to the Inquisition. In the second part of this case, Gertrudis goes to this cleric who tells her story. She knows that this is a body that's not necessarily on her side, but this is a body that she can appeal to.

Men and women do not seem to be treated differently by the Inquisition. For non-Spaniards, race was more of a determining factor in looking at people's position within the social hierarchy than gender. Gender's clearly important in terms of their interactions with each other, but in terms of the Inquisition it ends up being your racial situation that is more important.

3. How did you become interested in Inquisition cases? (2:06)

I was interested in the religious practices of Africans and their descendants, including Christianity. So one place to look for that is the Inquisition because the Inquisition is a body that is designed by the state to regulate Christian practice. Particularly in witchcraft cases, where people are doing something that's not conforming to Christian practice, you learn something about their ritual practices.

The Inquisition documents are a great set of sources. There's a lot of information about people's everyday lives. And then there are just scads of these renunciation cases. This is a crime that is closely associated with people identified as blacks and mulattoes. This case interested me because it was the case of a woman whose boss was also a woman, this nun Juana de la Cruz. The action takes place in a convent, so you can find out a lot about women's lives.

As a historian, I am always concerned with issues of production and also issues of audience. The records of Inquisition cases were generally created for other officials, so they weren't published. Everything happened in private. The cases were often sent to the court in Madrid, so that some cases end up in Spain. I'm interested in knowing who was involved, who the accused person was, what was the relationship between the accused person and the person that was accusing him or her, when the events happened.

These Inquisition cases are very popular for historians of colonial Latin America because they give so much information about people who are not going to show up in a lot of other records. I also have used records from religious organizations called *confraternities* to find out more about the religious lives of Africans and their descendants. There were huge numbers of Africans and then Creole blacks and mulattoes in New Spain, and yet it's very difficult to find information about them. Inquisition cases include genealogies.

Another good source for the lives of Africans and their descendants are wills. In wills, there are inventories. You can find out about people's family lives because of who they left money to. You can find out about their membership in religious associations because people will mention the *confraternities* that they belong to in their wills. You can find out about their financial lives by looking at what they left. One will I read that was written by a freed slave, one of the things he listed in his inventory was a piece of old cheese.

4. How do you use Inquisition cases as historical sources? (2:36)

There are some problems with using Inquisition documents. One of the things that's really great is that you seem to get first person accounts. Gertrudis is asked about her background and she says, "These were my parents, this was my life before I was in the convent, these are the people that I lived with. I worked in other places for a period of time." She talks about how much she was paid when she worked in certain places. It seems to be a first person account, but in fact it's not a first person account. I mean you always have to keep in mind that it's an Inquisition case; that people aren't just writing this down in the privacy of their own home. A notary is taking down the testimony.

And then also of course you have to think about the context. This is a scary situation, especially if you're a mulatta woman who has very few rights and privileges in this colonial society. So you have to look at what she said, the framework, and understand that she must have been intimidated.

They're saying things to achieve a certain effect. Juana de la Cruz said that Gertrudis renounced God three times. Juana may have been exaggerating the number of times to make her case for beating Gertrudis look better. Gertrudis may have been underestimating it to make herself look like a better Christian or to make it look more involuntary.

This is not so much about how to deal with the Inquisition, but it is about strategy. In this case, the nun says that Gertrudis had learned to renounce from this other mulatto who's named Alacrán or Scorpion. Gertrudis denies this. There are also some cases in which an owner of a slave told another slave or servant to whip the person who was being punished. Sometimes there was a lot of disagreement among the slaves about whether this person had renounced. You get the impression that maybe they were trying to help protect their fellow slave or servant. Looking at these cases in the aggregate does lead us to suspect that this is a strategy that people knew about.

Inquisition cases follow a certain prescribed pattern. As an example of formulaic language, the accused were asked if they know, suspect, or presume, the reason why they had been called to this commission. This is a way to get them to either say no, they have absolutely no idea, or a way to get them to spill their story. This is a question that is asked of everybody who comes in to the Inquisition. In some ways, you could argue that the renunciation itself is an example of this formulaic language. Gertrudis said that she *renounced God and his saints*. Juana de la Cruz said, "she said that she *renounced God and his saints*". And then other people say, "she said that she *renounced God and his saints*". You have to think, especially if it's in this situation where somebody's being beaten, would it really have come out like this? Would everybody have heard it exactly in that way? There's a strong possibility that something else was said and yet this is the formula in which it comes out. This provides us with another way of thinking about how much to believe that these are accurate accounts of what happened because everybody resorts to this formula.

5. How do students understand Inquisition documents? (4:25)

Because these cases are in Spanish, I generally describe them in my teaching more than presenting them with the transcription. The transcriptions are long and so it would be difficult to

get through it especially in an in-class exercise. I often assign them an article about an Inquisition case or I might present them with the bare facts of the case. They can also bring their knowledge of slavery and servitude, of social hierarchy to bear on their reading of my description of the case.

The way that I get students to break free of preconceived notions about the way a courtroom might work by giving them a lot of background on the Inquisition. The Inquisition, while it seems like a court that might be familiar from watching TV, is a court in which people are examined about their practice of Christianity.

You don't want students to come to conclusions based on 20th-century ideas about psychology or human nature. It is important to get students to talk a lot about the context.

So this is something that's really removed from students' experience. The cases themselves furnish students with a very good way of getting into the 17th-century mindset. Students pretty readily get the idea that the person may have renounced deliberately in order to get to the Inquisition.

One of the things that they notice is that the whole case is framed in this formulaic language. There are certain questions that inquisitors ask accusers and also people who are accused. Gertrudis, because she was a minor, was assigned a lawyer, so there's certain language that a lawyer says in response to certain questions. And they sort of quizzed her to be able to see if she could say certain prayers.

It's important to look at these cases in the aggregate. If you look at one Inquisition case, you wouldn't notice these universal aspects that occur. Students get to think about how transparent information is, how to weigh these issues of production and reception. And how they have to interpret statements based on the larger context.

Another way to get them to think about how different this situation is from the 21st century is by having them think about the punishments. People were punished publicly. Gertrudis was paraded through the streets as a way to publicly humiliate her. People who were convicted by the Inquisition had to wear certain clothes that indicated that they were being punished. Gertrudis's cousins say to her, "We're sending you to this sugar mill that's way out in the country so that you don't have to suffer the humiliation of having people see you on their way to mass."

One thing that's useful for students is to compare two different testimonies. So if you give them Juana de la Cruz's and if you give them Gertrudis's testimony, you can look at different details.

In Juana's testimony, she talks about how Gertrudis had committed an infraction. Juana punished her by using a scourge which nuns in the convent used for their own penitences. She says she used this to whip Gertrudis with her very little strength, *con su poca fuerza*.

Juana goes on to say that as the punishment began, Gertrudis showed herself to be rebellious and that she renounced God and His saints. Juana goes on to say that she and the other nuns were very frightened by this terrible outburst of Gertrudis, but she hadn't realized that Gertrudis had said this so she continued the beating. After Gertrudis renounced several more times, Juana finally stopped the beatings. It's significant actually that Juana says, "Well with my little strength." It's a way for her to say, "I'm a good woman. I'm occupying the gender roles that I'm supposed to occupy, and Gertrudis, she's terribly rebellious, and she's not occupying the social position that she's supposed to occupy."

Then if you show them Gertrudis's testimony, Gertrudis again emphasizes the severity of the beating and how harsh it was. She said twice that she would have to renounce even though she was a very good Christian. They're telling the same story in some ways but they're inflecting it differently. You can ask students why might they be telling the story different, just in this very specific context. Think about the larger social structure of New Spain. Well, what is it like to be a white woman in New Spain? What is it like to be a mulatto woman in New Spain? From this story, you can tell something about life inside the convent—that nuns have servants and that nuns might be beating these servants.

When I first saw this kind of renunciation case, I found it surprising that the Inquisition would be taking the reports and also the actions of slaves and servants so seriously. The Inquisition in some ways functions as a forum in which people can indirectly complain about their masters. That the inquisitors took it seriously enough to mount a case, to call witnesses, to assign Gertrudis a lawyer. This is a good thing for students to think about—why is the Inquisition so interested in this kind of case? It helps dispel the idea, first of all, that slaves and servants had absolutely no advocates, and that also they were living in some kind of world that was totally separate from the world of their masters or owners.