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# Indigenous religious traditions in Central Nicaragua: ethnohistorical documentation for an unknown archaeological record

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*The archaeological record in the central region of Nicaragua remains one of the most poorly understood in the Americas. Currently, there is merely a sketchy view on initial occupation, and some rudimentary data on late prehistoric habitational characteristics. An important aid in improving this regional field of archaeology is the use of Colonial Period documentary Spanish sources. In these texts, observations by Spanish missionaries and soldiers describe the ritual practices of the indigenous communities in the region, and reveal particular Mesoamerican or pan-American features. These improve current archaeological understandings of indigenous ceremonial activities and views of sacred landscapes.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The colonization of the Americas has produced an invaluable documentary record for the study of the indigenous past of the continent. Although far from straightforward in their content, the chronicles written by those involved in the conquest have left us a look at the indigenous societies in many regions of Central and South America. Even for the pre-Hispanic past of Nicaragua, the small number of known early works has received considerable attention from both (ethno-)historians and archaeologists. However, not until the late sixteenth century are any detailed written data available for the central region of Nicaragua. Considered a mountainous backwater during the first half of the sixteenth century, this central region (including the areas of the modern political provinces or departments of Matagalpa, Boaco, Chontales, San Juan del Sur and RAAS) did not grasp the attention of the Spanish colonizer (fig. 1). Also due to its poorly accessible geography and hostile indigenous population, considered ‘barbaric’, any significant extent of colonization effort was discouraged. In a large part due to the communications that occurred between the Spanish and the Nicarao indigenous peoples, living on the Pacific coast, a pejorative cultural representation of the indigenous communities in the central region was formed around the ethnic identifier of ‘Chontal’ (Ibarra Rojas 1994, 233). Considered enemies by the Nicarao, the Chontal in particular, and the central region in general, came to be seen as unattractive to Spanish entries.

These negative considerations on the part of the Spanish change dramatically once the earliest reports on the natural resources in the central region started to emerge. Mainly due to the reported presence of gold around the communities of La Libertad and Santo Domingo, the region now becomes rather attractive to have control over, both to the Spanish Crown and to the English and the Dutch from the Caribbean side of the country. Still, the mines of Chontales were not exploited until the eighteenth century, so that these activities predominantly had their effect on the Nueva Segovia region at the beginning of the conquest.

For the Spanish ‘colonizer’, the English and Dutch incursions and the potential threat these formed to the Spanish Pacific region were the convincing argument for establishing a permanent and visible Spanish presence in the central region. From the subsequent period, multiple historical documents are known with accounts and descriptions of the indigenous cultural practices witnessed by Spanish missionaries and soldiers active in the region. Such cultural practices provide contexts to the archaeological remains currently being studied in the central region. In this chapter we elaborate briefly on some of these valuable but little-studied documentary sources, from the *Archivo General de Indias* (hereafter AGI), the *Archivo General de Centro America* (hereafter AGCA), the Historical Archives of the Franciscan Province of Michoacán, the Temple of San Francisco at Celaya (hereafter AHC) and the Archives of the Curia of the City of Guatemala (hereafter ACG).<sup>1</sup> We focus on the presence of Spanish missionaries and their views on the indigenous ritual practices to improve current understandings of ceremonial activities and indigenous views of sacred landscapes.

## 2 THE SPANISH COLONIZATION OF CENTRAL NICARAGUA

As elsewhere in Central America, central Nicaragua was not conquered in one single attempt. This is confirmed by the early chronicles of the time and tribute lists, which indicate that at no time were major Spanish cities established there, in the sense of administrative centres. Consequently, cultural, economic and political change followed a trajectory different to that in the Pacific region. These differences formed a basis



Figure 1 Map of Central Nicaragua.

for introducing the concept of the so-called “Frontera Segoviana”, following the central mountains of Nicaragua and effectively circumscribing the Spanish-controlled territory (Van Broekhoven 2002, 69-70).

Previous studies have observed that the demographic decline of the population was much greater on the Pacific coast than in the central region of the country and that villages closer to Spanish settlements were significantly more affected than remote indigenous communities. Likely the indigenous Mosquito population, located in the Caribbean coastal zone, had some sense of the dangers represented by the Spanish colonizer (Van Broekhoven 2002, 69-70). Knowing the difficulties experienced by the Spanish when conquering the area, one wonders how reliable the numbers are that we have from the first census for the central region of Nicaragua. Nonetheless, it is significant that the number of expedited land titles is significantly lower than in other regions of Nicaragua, and that land rights of the indigenous communities seem to have been better protected, or at least were not as severely affected by the arrival of the Spanish (Radell 1969; Newsom 1987, 116; Incer 1990). This limited impact was likely due to the fact that most of the indigenous communities were located in the mountainous interior, which had effectively not been conquered by the Spanish.

### 3 CONQUERING THE INVINCIBLE

While the central region only experienced sporadic contact with the Spanish colonizers, the Pacific was placed entirely under Spanish control, and therefore, under the *encomienda* system in the early sixteenth century. This system regulated rights to land and (indigenous) labour in the Spanish colonies. From the mid-sixteenth century, however, the boundary of the area administered by the Spanish was gradually expanded eastward. As such, ever more indigenous communities were subjected to the *encomienda* system. Meanwhile, in the frontier areas, which had proved difficult to conquer, catholic missions were established. For much of the Colonial period, however, a large portion of the indigenous population in the central region remained outside Spanish control, immediately east of the *Frontera Segoviana*.

In the territory of the modern province of Chontales, contacts with the Spanish were somewhat irregular. For example, direct contact between royal and local officials and representatives of indigenous people was established only through mayors and magistrates who, according to Newsom, “were probably the worst oppressors of the Indians” (Newsom 1987, 128). Formally, these officials were responsible for collecting taxes, redistribution of work within the division or township and civil and criminal jurisdiction in

cases of “indios contra españoles” or “indios contra indios”. As such, mayors and magistrates exercised almost exclusive control over the communication between the colonized and colonizers, being in the ideal position to equally exploit both. This type of contact mostly occurred in rural areas, not in towns: “the nearer villages were to the residences of officials, the greater the likelihood and degree of exploitation they suffered” (Newson 1987, 129).

The abuse of the magistrates who ruled the central region was many times the subject of discussion in colonial documents, found in the archives of Guatemala and Spain. A long range of abuses is mentioned, often tyrannical and cruel behaviour by the governors, magistrates and mayors that even frightened the Spanish visitors to the region, causing them to report these serious abuses. Already in 1608 Friar Francisco Rivera mentions that relocation of the montañeses or mountain people is difficult, above all, for fear of abuse: “lo que mas se temen [los indígenas], es del mal tratamiento de los españoles”.<sup>2</sup> Later on we will discuss some of the writings of Friar Rivera.

In general, magistrates and mayors ruling over provinces of Nicaragua and Costa Rica were notorious for abusing the indigenous people working on their farms and land: they forbade them to go to church on holidays and sold their goods at inflated prices. The magistrates of Sébaco are mentioned as some of the cruelest in such abuses. Around 1670, for example, the abuse at Sébaco reached such a degree that they caused “mas [de] trecientos Indios con sus familias [...] dejasen su reducción y se fuesen a los Montes”.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in a report of Friar Andrés de las Navas Quevedo from 1680 concerning the mayor of Sébaco, Jacob of Alcayaga, the friar compares the attitude of the magistrates and mayors to the destruction that would have followed would three pests have been unleashed in sequence, and even that would not have caused an equal amount of harm.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this destructive behaviour, combined with the introduction of diseases and the slave trade, the population of the central region had been reduced to such an extent that cattle ranchers, originating from Granada and intent on settling in the region, easily came to outnumber the indigenous population (Radell 1969). The largely indigenous population of the central region predominantly lived in the mountains. Since land divisions were focused on the foothills and plains of the region and less in the mountains, much of the indigenous population in the central region was not much affected by these divisions, or by the *encomienda* system. This is the primary reason why there is only little information on the indigenous communities of this central region and the pertaining land divisions and land titles. Based on this lack of previously known historical data, some researchers have proposed that the central region was scarcely inhabited and that its indigenous population density

was much lower than elsewhere. However, numerous reports, some presented here, authored by the missionaries of communities in the mountains and its hinterland, sketch a different image for the early colonial period in central Nicaragua.

#### 4 CHRISTIANIZATION: MISSIONARY STRATEGY AND INDIGENOUS RESPONSE

The spiritual conquest of the region was carried out mainly by the Franciscan missions of the Order of Divine Mercy. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this order focused on relocating numerous indigenous communities in order to subject them to Spanish rule and the Catholic faith.

Even though the Franciscans had a number of missions in Nicaragua and in part managed some of the taxpaying indigenous villages, they remained inactive in the conversion of indigenous subjects until the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Their missionary efforts were largely unsuccessful, to some extent due to the limited financial support given to them by the Crown, and also because of the conversion methods used by missionaries. Their written reports, however, describe a number of indigenous ritual practices.

At the outset of the process to relocate the indigenous population, the church thought that this would take place in an orderly fashion and relatively quickly. It was believed that “aquellas bárbaras gentes que depuesta la nativa ferocidad, [...] vienen como mansos corderos al rebaño de la iglesia”.<sup>5</sup> That was the Franciscan outlook, when in 1610, Friar Francisco de Rivera revisits the relocated indigenous populations in the central region and reports that about two hundred people were living “en formada población” and were in the process of being instructed in the faith. Among them 84 adults and at least 54 minors had already been baptized, which, according to Rivera, is a straightforward affair: “porque al parecer reçivan estos infieles lo que se les enseña, y aun a nosotros con voluntad y amor”.<sup>6</sup> Friar Juan de Albuquerque mentions the same thing when it comes to the relocations carried out further inland, on the banks of the river Muy Muy: “visto que sin mucha contradicción y algo alegres revivían nuestra santa fe, procuro q en un lugar cómodo junto al mismo rio hiciesen las casas y yglesias y para ello”.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, however, the friars realized the difficulties of their undertaking. Consequently, they tried to convert the indigenous people as far removed as possible from their communities since they would, even though supposedly converted or relocated, still return to their homes in the mountains: “no lo e logrado porque luego que me sentian desamparauan sus bibiendas y se me huian a la Montaña que es ynpenetrable”.<sup>8</sup> In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the indigenous people were no longer so easily persuaded with gifts and trinkets as in earlier

periods. Besides that, their previous interest had waned, many of the gifts were readily available via trade in the Mosquitia with the Sambo indigenous people and the English themselves (Ibarra Rojas 2011). The result of all this is that the so-called ‘mountain people’ largely ceased to come down from the mountains, not only for fear of the diseases that awaited them there, but also due to the high taxes that were demanded from them and the abuse they received.

When the mentioned techniques of persuasion failed, Spanish soldiers were sent to the indigenous mountain communities with orders to return them to their relocations. There was considerable controversy among the Spanish over the use of force in converting the indigenous people here. While some felt that it was impossible to do this by force, and persuasion was seen as the only way to make a lasting conversion, others believed in fierce and long-lasting punishment.<sup>9</sup> The former considered the participation of indigenous ‘relocators’ timely and essential. These were speakers of native languages and knowledgeable about the customs of the peoples concerned.

One of the problems that the Catholic powers faced was the diversity of languages spoken among the different communities. The Order accordingly advised missionaries to learn and know the languages spoken in the regions where they preached in order to facilitate the conversion of the indigenous people.<sup>10</sup> However, it was almost impossible to learn them all. To solve this problem, the missionaries operating in the central region adopted different strategies. One was to capture and convert a small number of indigenous people, who could then act as interpreters. This phenomenon can be observed, for example, during visits by judges who brought multilingual interpreters with them.<sup>11</sup> Another method was to use indigenous converts, who had proven to be very devout, sending them to the people that remained to be relocated.

In a letter from Duarte Navarro directed at Juan de Albuquerque concerning the relocations, the methods applied in relocating the locals are described in detail, carefully explaining this process for the central region. Here we can observe that the first conversions that took place far inland in the central region, in the year 1606, were undertaken in charge of a native of the region of Muy Muy, who knew the language and was the only one brave enough to enter more than 30 leagues inland. He dared enter very rough and high mountains, crossing fast-flowing rivers and walking across very muddy land:

“Fray Juan de Albuquerque de la horden de nra señora de la merced dice que en el año de 1606, siendo comendador del convento del pueblo de çibaco jurisdicción de leon [...] supo como en las montañas de tauauaca junto al rrio de muy muy habia cantidad de yndios montañeses ynfeles y procuro ynbiarles un yndio cristiano llamado Don Diego Hernandez para que les persuadiese de su parte a que

reuiuiese el Santo Bautismo [...] procuro luego [...] y les trajo se boluiesen xnos y a monesto lo muebo q les ynportaua el serlo y que desta manera ganarian el cielo y tendrian comunicacion con los otros yndios xnos y que Vuestra magestad los faouereceria y ampararia en todo y que nadie les agraiuaria lo qual tomaron bien”.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, he was the only one who could communicate with the natives he encountered in the area:

“... dexo al yndio don Diego xno le seruia de ynterprete, por que la lengua que el sauia del pueblo de cebaco aunque en algunos bocablos frisaba e con la suya, no hera bastante para poderles deçir y dar a entender lo que el queria y hasi servia este yndio de ynterpete [sic] y por q este hauia sido el primero q de ellos dio noticia se detubo los dias q pudo”.<sup>13</sup>

After finding new indigenous communities, missionaries typically decided to relocate them. In other words, people were removed from their homes, displaced, and had their livelihood completely changed. To relocate them from further afield in the mountains to for example the river plains, to keep them under control and in the vicinity of the estates of the conquerors to enable them to provide personal services, missionaries needed to obtain land and build homes for settling the newly relocated indigenous people. These themselves used to build a church and, separately, had to learn the Christian faith, attend Mass and dress like the other Christianized indigenous people. The Spanish offer in return, instead of trinkets, usually consisted of promising tax exemptions. The intention was that the other indigenous people in the region, who had refused to be relocated, seeing the good treatment, “dejaran sus ydolatrias y vendran a conocimiento de la Berdad”.

At first, some of the missionaries were convinced that only through mild treatment could the indigenous people be relocated. However, over time, this attitude changed completely. Complaints about mistreatment of indigenous people by the Spanish conquerors were countless, as were complaints about the missionaries. We found numerous documents by various municipal authorities (“Regidor y todos los los prinipales y tatoques”) directed to the Royal Crown. These contain complaints of abuse, theft of money, rape and abuse of female mayors, which, according to these letters, motivated the regional depopulation: “por lo cual se despuebla mi pueblo temerosos de que no hallan remedio, ni consuelo ni administracion, ni sacerdote que los entierre [...]”.<sup>14</sup>

## 5 INDIGENOUS RITUAL CONCEPTS IN THE CENTRAL REGION

The importance of missionary texts, although written in Spanish and by religious evangelists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cannot be underestimated. These texts provide us with an inexhaustible source of information of a highly variable character, both about the intentions of

the friars, and about the thinking, customs and beliefs of the indigenous peoples of central Nicaragua. In fact, they provide us with the only texts that endured to the present time since so far no other reviews about worldview, ideology, beliefs and customs of this area were known. Unfortunately, the information generated in these documents is utterly corrupted by the intolerant views of the friars. These were trained monks who arrived prepared to condemn any opinion or tradition that did not coincide with theirs. As we will see below, in doing so, indigenous concepts were placed within their own preconceived frameworks, serving Christian religious concepts such as “demonios”, “brujas (witches)” and other forms of “idolatría” in general.

### 5.1 *Indigenous “Witchcraft”*

When the Friars Rodrigo de Betancourt and Tomas Delgado arrived at the Pueblo Nuevo of San Pedro Metapa near Sébaco, they received the news that in some villages in the vicinity witchcraft was still being practised. In particular, in the communities of Matagalpa, Solingalpa, Molaguina, Xinotega and Muy Muy, all of them pertaining to Sébaco. Fray Rodrigo de Betancourt decided not to enter the towns because he was not very hopeful this would pay off. Considering that the mentioned communities were close to where they were at the time, the friars instead decided to bring over some of these “brujos y dolatras y malos”. Based on the information given by inhabitants of Pueblo Nuevo, Rodrigo de Betancourt admonished the “brujos” to cease their “errors”.

The friar compiled a report which in part refers to an enchanted cave, located in a hill called Cuyotepet, situated near the village of Sébaco. The “presidente Capitán Alguazil mayor, sus ministros y mujeres,” came to this cave every week to make human sacrifices (eight persons including children, young and old), slit throats and give blood to “los demonios”, committing acts of cannibalism: stewing the meat of the slaughtered persons and eating it. According to the report, those attending transformed into different types of animals by wearing their skins, and once in their converted state began to cohabitate “nefanda- y bestialmente”. Also, through their powders, enchanted rocks and roots they had all kinds of powers and supernatural forces. They could kill, love, “torear y melear”. In the eyes of the friars such acts should be denominated as diabolical and superstitious and therefore had to be eliminated. The report furthermore reveals that the cave had a snake in a “chaguite” which could only be seen by those who visited to the cave, while in fact the cave would only open when hearing some words from the mouths of particular people: the President and the Captain.<sup>15</sup>

What can be seen here is that nearly all the elements mentioned above correspond to stereotypical characteristics of witchcraft in Europe. Examples are the slit throats, acts of

cannibalism, or processing of animals and humans living together in a kind of Black Sabbath. Phenomena which can be seen in the famous meetings of witches in Late Medieval Europe, who supposedly flew on broomsticks to live among themselves and execute their spells.

On the other hand, many of these same elements could also be interpreted as remnants of rites and ceremonies with a pre-Hispanic indigenous origin, such as the transforming into different animals, like a tiger, monkey or deer, all of which played an important role in the indigenous worldview. Also the use of dust, rocks and roots to manipulate situations and people is a pre-Hispanic indigenous practice.

Other elements that appear in the documents even more clearly indicate that part of the narrative produced by the friars surely must be interpreted as having an indigenous pre-Hispanic nature. This is seen in, for example, the phenomenon of the ‘owners’ of the hills, the rain and the storms, the demon that “les apareze las mas vezes en figura de sus biejos difuntos” and who, therefore, easily knows how to manipulate neighbours of the community, the use of red beans as an instrument of divination, the use of crosses as a repellent for “brujas”, the gourd of worms that had to be conserved through “flores de espino”.

The friars, having heard of the cave, would have wanted to try and find it and end the ceremonies that took place there. To this purpose they attempted to attract the elderly and women who controlled its entry. Thus, they entered the village of Sébaco, and took two old men and one woman, incarcerating two of them, the president Melchor Lopez and his wife, in El Castillo, this probably being the Spanish fortification on the San Juan river. The cave, however, was never found.

### 5.2 *Resistance to conversion*

According to reports by friars, the attitude of the villagers of Xinotega, Matagalpa and Sébaco towards them was hostile and deceitful. Consider, for example, the description offered by Friar Antonio Margíl de Jesús when he says:

“... los yndios le an engañado traiendole dos o tres noches por el monte tonteando sin querer descubrir la orrorosa cueba por que el demonio les manda no lo agan por ser tan orrorosa”.<sup>16</sup>

The consternation of the friar suggests that Margíl de Jesús was not used to being tricked like this. As we will discuss below, Luis Antonio Muñoz, Chief Justice and War Captain of Sébaco, was also often facing the same kind of deceptions and misunderstandings in a village near to Jinotega. The most extreme case can be seen in Sébaco where friar Rodrigo de Betancourt tells us, his desperation reached such a point that he no longer considered it possible to evangelize the community and decided to leave it as a lost case, filled with rebels:

“Fray Rodrigo, abiendo salido de el dicho Pueblo Nuevo para este de Matagalpa y passando mui zerca de el de Sébaco no quiso entrar en el a azer la Santa mission conoziendo el poco fruto que abía de sacar y les echo su maldizion por rebeldes y bino a este de Matagalpa[...].”<sup>17</sup>

In some cases, the friar thought it indeed quite impossible to eradicate the witchcraft practices. To illustrate this, the following quote by Margíl de Jesús:

“No excusso en la ocasion pressisa dezir azerca de tantos tan repetidos y diabolicos ebustes en que la fazil y mala naturaleza de estos Yndios estan metidos el poco o ningun remedio que a de tener esto porque aunque aora con las exortaxiones de estos varones apostolicos parece hauerse consumido muchos ynstrumentos diabolicos quemado y conjurado cuebas extinguido pactos y abussos; como no se han hecho castigos exemplares que les sirba de escarmiento an de boluer con maior fuerza a sus maldades y aunque sean quitado estas tres o quatro cauezillas con destierro al castillo sin embargo dejan muchas raizes en la enseñanza de sus dizipulos porque todos ellos son Naturalm[en]te, [124r] ynclinados a lo malo y a cossas diabolicas sin poder los reducir a razon ; porque quitar a los Yndios si se les pierde la bestia o la vez que dejen de buscar al zaboril, o sabio (que ellos llaman) para que echela suerte o les dee el Polbo o la piedra es querer atajar los reios y poner puertas al campo porque es aquello mas de su errencia que la ley evangelica.”<sup>18</sup>

In this quote one can recognize how far removed his preachings were from the laws and customs of the indigenous populations of central Nicaragua.

In this particular case, all inhabitants of Matagalpa were summoned to turn in their “maldades, cañutos, polvos para enamorar, boltear, sortear, torear, encantar, melear y otras cosas” as it was known, “por ciertos informes”, that “brujerías, ydolatrías y malefizios” existed in the town.<sup>19</sup> As Luis Antonio Muñoz confirms in his letter, the inhabitants of Matagalpa had been threatened that “si bien no lo entregauan serían castigados por la justizia”. It is unclear whether this ‘justice’ refers to an ecclesiastical or secular court. Apparently, all residents had turned in their powders and other instruments of “brujería”: “Me asegura dicho M.[R.P.] que todos fueron entregando sus maldades cañutos, polvos para enamorar, boltear, sortear, torear, encantar, melear y otras cosas”.<sup>20</sup>

However, there was still the cave from where all these instruments originated. In fact there were four caves, decorated with pictographs. The cave wall paintings represented various wild animals like snakes, jaguars, and monkeys and were made using red and chalk pigments:

“[...] descubrieron quatro cuevas (no me quiso dezir si abía en ellas sacrificios) dijome supe y vi que en ellas auía pintados demonios sierpes tigres micos y otros animales ynmundos en los peñascos. Como así vi el y dados de Almagra y tiza y tan feos y abominables que caussaban orror [...]”.<sup>21</sup>

The level of detail offered in the friar’s description of the ceremonies held in the cave, is impressive:

“... y que/ estos al son de un tanboritillo mui funesto y peque/ño rezeuian y tomaban cuerpo bailaban comian/ y coabitaban con los Cofrades de las Tales cuebas/ y al mismo son se ponía el tamborillillo como de oro/ y toda la cueba mui limpia enramada y dora/da con pacto y aparienzia diabolica enseñoeme / un gusanillo biuo que era un demonio para sus em/bustes de hechura extraordinaria y unos ojillos/ alumbrantes que de noche alumbrauan como una can/dela y una corona de ule para el Rey y otros trastes/ que recojio tan supertiziosos que dava orror”.

In this quote several elements are mentioned that play a role in the ritual practices conducted in the caves. For example, the little drum “mui funesto y pequeño”, to the sound of which, those who visited the cave, lived and danced with the “cofrades de la cueva”. We can interpret these “cofrades” as “duendes” that are mentioned further on in the text and will be discussed later on. Another feature of the drum was that it changed in appearance and turned golden when beaten. During such ceremonies the cave itself also underwent certain changes. It was decorated with flowers, and, similar to the drum, its interior colour changed into a golden colour. It is unclear why the “trastes” caused horror or were objects of superstition. Were these ceramic vessels or gourds? Did these have decorative elements that caused the horror among the friars? Concerning the worm symbol with which the cheating was done, this also has some magical properties: apart from being a living creature, it had eyes that lit up at night, which obviously may point to an identification as a firefly.

Of particular interest is the mention of a rubber crown “para el Rey”. We do not know what kind of king is referred to here by the friars, but this information is highly significant because, until now, it had been generally accepted that the central region of Nicaragua had poorly defined social inequality.

To the extent possible for them, the friars were keen on destroying the caves by setting fires in them, a feat that had to be undertaken in risky circumstances:

“[...] que [lla]maronse las dhas quatro cuebas con assistensia de mi theniente en Ynterim que yo estaua en sebaco; y me aseguran de una dhas cuebas que esta cassi dentro de el Pueblo y mui zercana a la Yglesia de la parzialidad molaguina que con poca lleña se le dio fuego y luego comenzo a hazer un ruido como bramidos sordos de toro y a poco rato dio unos truenos tan orrorosos y arrojó por alto las peñas mui grandes mui largo trecho que todos se admiraron concordando los dictámenes en que fue sentimiento de algun Demonio que allí abitaba. [120r] Y en las demas cuebas susedio lo mismo aunque no con tal movimiento.”<sup>22</sup>

### 5.3 *A possible reference to stone statuary in the central region*

In Jinotega the resistance to the conquest expressed itself in a similar manner. When the war captain Luis Antonio Muñoz, the missionaries, together with the priest from Matagalpa,

Ignacio Galiano, arrive at the town of Jinotega, a resident of the village offers them to deliver the “bulto de Virgen”. Its description (see below), including words like “Ydolo” and “ydolo demonio”, makes it likely that this bundle of the Holy Virgin looked like a type of stone statue, anthropomorphic in character, female, two feet or more in height: “de media vara o tres quartas de alto de piedra blanquisca echura de muger las manos puestas y la cara rossada”.<sup>23</sup>

The description is ambiguous, it might be a reference to a statue of the Catholic Virgin but it seems implausible that the friars and Luis Antonio Muñoz would describe this image as ‘ydolo demonio’. The description of the bundle or statue is reminiscent of the widespread pre-Hispanic tradition of stone statuary documented in the central region (Geurds *et al.* 2010). The description that Luis Antonio Muñoz offers is arguably somewhat brief, but still allows for a comparison with the indigenous stone statues in the collection of the Museum Gregorio Aguilar Barea (Figure 2). Luis Antonio Muñoz’s references to the statue as being an idol, who spoke

to them “en todo quanto se les ofrezia y le pedian”, combined with the references to ceremonies and offerings of candles and incense that were made to the idol by the indigenous religious specialist and two other persons who, “en aquel tiempo (eran) Adan y Eva” and went to the mountain to “buscar el remedio de sus nessesidades”, undoubtedly provide more evidence. The statues may have been material memories of ancestors, possibly from a deep and sacred past. Indeed, the references by Luis Antonio Muñoz, Margíl de Jesús and friar Rodrigo de Betancourt indicate that some of the statues were seen and worshipped as pre-Hispanic deities, and that the Virgin as described by them is merely another example of this.

#### 6 THE “DUENDE”: AN EVIL POWER

During their quest to eliminate the cult of the Virgin bundle, Luis Antonio Muñoz and friar Margíl de Jesús, learned of other beliefs in Jinotega as well, expressed by “pontifizes” and representations of Adam and Eve. The latter were represented as an old man and his wife, seen accompanying



Figure 2 Stone statues in the collection of the Museum Gregorio Aguilar Barea

others on their journey to the abovementioned cave, crossing a small lagoon “que haze a la falda de un serro entre monte espeso sombrío y funebre”. The old man told them that in this place, in the location of the lake, the image of the “demonio” first appeared. At that time in Spanish garb, but during the second time dressed as an “Yndio Viejo”. This old man was the one who provided them with powders to fall in love or make other charms, and gave “frijoles y para tirar bien las flechas al benado y para fuerza y otras yeruas y raizes venenosas y malas”.

Based on the information we currently have, most of “las brujerías” were made by women of an advanced age, and therefore with considerable knowledge. Take, for example, the reference by friar Margíl to a witch from Queretaro (Mexico) who admits all her spells to Margíl and friar Juan Alonso de Ortega. Margíl describes the scene in reference to a quote from “Treatise on the superstitions of the Indians Matagalpa [sic], Jinotega, Muimui, and others from Sébaco; and the various entanglements with which the devil deceives so-called sorcerers”, authored by friar Rodrigo de Betancourt. The contents of this document are still unknown at the moment, and, accordingly, the extracts we documented in the Archivo de la Curia, are extremely interesting. When Margíl comes across a “bruja” in Queretaro and hears her confessions, the priest views the situation described by friar Rodrigo about “witches” in Matagalpa and Sébaco as greatly similar:

“[812r] cuando [...] pasé a Queretaro, una gran bruja, mobida por Dios, nos comunicó, y declaró al Reverendo Padre Fray Juan Alonso de Ortega, Ex Guardian de dicho colegio [812v] y a mi, todas sus artes, nos entregó los instrumentos, declaró quienes son los papas, obispos de Queretaro, y sus alrededores, y el modo de sacrificios, maleficios, nahuales, armas etc. es lo mismo, que lo que escribe en su Quaderno el Reverendo Padre Fray Rodrigo, solo sirve disuena, lo que dicho Padre Fray Rodrigo dice en su dicho Quaderno, que todos todos, desde el vientre de su Madre nacen brujos etc. por que sus padres desde entonses los entregan al Demonio, no es assi, por que esta misma vieja, con ser desde el vientre de su madre gran bruja, porque sus padres lo eran, y la entregaron al Demonio, pero es casada con un yndio ladino, mui buen cristiano, inosente de toda la maldad de su muger, pues dice ella, que siempre se ha guardado de su marido, y de todos los demas cristianos, sean Indios, o no lo sean, que no son del Arte, y assi no todos son brujos, sino solos aquellos que desienden de brujos, o por su mal natural lo quieren ser, arrimandose a los brujos, como disipulos para aprender & y lo mismo creo de todo esse Reyno de Guatemala”.<sup>24</sup>

Contrastingly, Muñoz also refers to a young person aged between sixteen and twenty years who he had arrested. This young man told him: “[...] que tenía una cueba donde con siertas palabras le salia un duende en figura de un hombre chiquillo y le ablaua y le daua poluos de enamorar, piedras de torear y debrazos raizes de matar poluos de tirar venado y

otros ymundizias”.<sup>25</sup> The agreement with this “duende” was that after obtaining the powders which are necessary, the one who received them “se abía de labar la chrisma en una batea que sacaba allí el demonio”.<sup>26</sup> Such an act was considered diabolical in the eyes of the friars.

The description is revealing also for the reason that for the “duende” to give what it was asked, the requesting person also had to maintain four worms that were kept in a gourd and that one had to “mantener estos quatro gusanos con unas flores de espino que llevaba cada semana a remudar”. Here then is mentioned a list of objects that played a role in the indigenous ceremonies: a gourd (hence our suggestion that the “trastes” mentioned in the folio [119v] may have been gourds), the punt and chrisma. It also mentions a “duende” which lives in the cave, and four white-coloured worms.

However, this case is not the only example. Elsewhere, the friars also were confronted with evil “duendes” and deceivers who seemed to have some common characteristics, such as the ability to make predictions, knowing how to avoid the friars, not showing themselves when the friars came to stop them, and talking loudly while hiding from sight.

## 7 HUNTING FOR WITCHES

In central Nicaragua, as in medieval Europe, the demonological aspects of witch hunt were accompanied by a period of political and social upheaval. Who were these witches Margíl de Jesús, Betancourt and his companions had in mind? What kind of witchcraft did Luis Muñoz expect to encounter when he made his entry into Sébaco and Jinotega? To answer this we have to clarify the cultural context in which the friars based their judgments and findings. Since it is the Catholic and European mentality during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that is the likely cause of the lack of understanding on the part of the friars, when confronted with, what were to them, unknown and mysterious indigenous ritual practices in Nicaragua.

If we uncritically accept the interpretations of the conquerors in order to understand the beliefs and ritual system of the indigenous communities in Central Nicaragua, we then would need to assume that a notion of evil existed among the indigenous concepts, that equaled the European concept of Satan or a comparable entity that embodied all the evil in the world and, simultaneously, another entity that symbolized everything good and divine in the world. As Irene Silverblatt rightly shows in the case of Andean indigenous societies:

“[...] La cosmología andina no tenía una noción del mal, encarnado en un ser satánico. En contrario, la filosofía andina implica una visión ‘dialéctica’ del universo en el cual fuerzas opositoras eran vistas como recíprocas y complementarias, necesario para la reproducción de la sociedad en su conjunto” (Silverblatt 1987:172).<sup>27</sup>

Silverblatt's description has been shared by many contemporary authors, both for the Andean world and for the circum-Caribbean and Mesoamerican culture areas. But this obviously was not the image that the conquerors sought to demonstrate to the European public. The tremendous discrepancy between the image that the friars were projecting onto the indigenous reality and reality itself, is noteworthy. Similarly, in the case of central Nicaragua, the Franciscan friars, together with the conquistadores, through the lens of their demonological xenophobia, found themselves surrounded by witchcraft, encountering evil deeds everywhere. A devil might be hiding under any rock and a witch under any bed.<sup>28</sup>

This unwavering belief caused any magic or miracle that could not be attributed unequivocally to divine intervention, to be attributed to the devil. Gradually, this increased the opposition to witchcraft and the commonly encountered traditional healers. These also began to be accused of diabolical practices, and allegedly making pacts with Satan. Most of the accusations were aimed at women, even though in this particular case of central Nicaragua there is a notable absence of women as protagonists of "brujerías". Especially elderly women or single ones were viewed as more susceptible to the promises of the devil, in the eyes of witch-hunters, taking into account that Eve was the one who was seduced by the serpent in Eden.

The Spanish conquest was able to convey the concept of the devil to the Americas, and along with her the idea of the witch and wizard, as can be amply observed in Mexico, North America and the Andean area. This process introduced these concepts in cultures that do not have any link to ideas of that nature.

The campaign waged by the Church to destroy the indigenous ritual practices is an integral part of the process of colonization by the Spanish conquerors. It is commonly known that from the Spanish first contact with the New World, the devil was omnipresent in the minds of the savage, barbaric and primitive inhabitants of these lands: "How else to explain the dedication that these people had towards the hills, trees, stones, sun, moon, rivers and water sources?" (Silverblatt 1987, 170).

## 8 EVALUATING OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CENTRAL NICARAGUA

In 1700 the Bishop of the Cathedral of Nicaragua sent notice of his doubts about whether indigenous peoples were truly converted to the Real Audiencia of Guatemala. He notes that: "[...] llegado a aquella Provincia [...] hallo tan grande ygnorancia en mucha gente de ella de los misterios de la fe, que muchos no sabian la doctrina christiana y esto no solo entre los Indios, negros, mulatos y Mezticos [...], sino en muchos Españoles, hijos de los que auian pasado de estos Reynos desde su conquista [...]"<sup>29</sup>

The situation made him take the necessary measures to repair "so much loss". He commanded the ministers and friars to carefully teach the Christian Doctrine<sup>30</sup>, and force the faithful to hear mass on holidays. Hundreds of friars were sent throughout the whole of New Spain in order to verify up to what point 'the natives' had truly been converted. It soon became clear that a re-evangelization needed to be undertaken. The result of the missions could only be interpreted in one way: although the indigenous peoples involved pretended to have been converted to the Catholic faith and were worshipping the true and only God, in reality they were still worshipping their old 'idols', they continued to worship the powers of nature, at the same time as the Catholic Saints.

During his travels throughout Chontales, captain Muñoz met a great variety of peoples that had not been converted at all. According to him, the indigenous peoples:

"acuden al pueblo y a la Yglesia a missa y cossas de christianos forzados de el temor de la Justizia y no de otra suerte, entran en la yglesia aziendo mill zeremonias para engañarnos como yo e visto en los Yndios que se an hallado ora ser brujos y demonios quien los biera antes en las yglesias no lo creciera siendo los que parecen de mas razon y ladinos y estos los peores y como son por estos los demas estimaxion entre ellos con fazilidad persuaden a otros ygnorantes a estas maldades."<sup>31</sup>

He came to the conclusion that in large parts of the more marginal areas outside the urbanized Spanish settlements, and specifically in the central region, the spiritual conquest of the population had failed miserably. Muñoz, who, for example had expected to find the village of Jinotega clean of all wizardry, since it had been visited by friar Rodrigo de Betancourt, finds its inhabitants to be persistent in an innumerable number of superstitions and wickedness. All the while, Fray Rodrigo de Betancourt had declared the village to have been cleaned of all idols and other evildoers. According to him, all idolatrous objects had been turned over to the friars and destroyed. Nonetheless, Muñoz account tells of "una idolatría muy antigua" ([120r]) in which the whole village was involved, and those who were not disposed to participate in its mischievous acts, were killed by the neighbours of the village: "haber los Yndios marterizado muerto y quemado un yndio llamado Salvador Ruiz que era buen christiano y no quiso entrar en la ydolatria".<sup>32</sup>

### 8.1 *Antropomorphic Crosses*

On top of this, Muñoz found in Jinotega "otro genero de brujería y superstizion esquissita": at the time when the instruments of witchcraft were asked to be turned in, four neighbours turned in crosses made of wooden bark ("cáscara de madera") bound together with rope, as to resemble

anthropomorphic figures. The crosses that represented female figures were smaller in size than the male ones:

“... cada Yndio tenia dos cruces la una para Hombre y la otra para mujer la de Hombre era un poco maior y la de mujer menor echas de una cascara de palo a manera de estopa mui bien rebuelto y amarrado con unos mecatillos en ygualdad, formando manos en los remates de los brazos y en la cauera como una carilla pintada y rebultos unos trapillos sutiles.”<sup>33</sup>

With those crosses, they said, they could paralyse witches. They were, so to speak, counter-witch instruments to be located on crossroads that were known to be places where game wandered at night. It was known that game were actually transformed witches who liked to wander around. With the crosses the game/witch could be paralysed and killed by means of a bow and arrow.

“de manera que para matar los brujos que andauan de noche por los caminos o por el pueblo echos animales tigres micos et[cetera] ponian estas cruces en el suelo encontradas dos cruces de Hombre y mujer y en llegando alli los animales brujos se detenian de tal suerte que no podian dar passo atras ni adelante por la fuerza de el encanto y alli los flechauan y matauan que para ello estauan espiano los que abian puesto las cruces y de esta suerte hauian muerto muchos segun le contaron al M.R.P. fr. Antonio y a mi.”<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, according to the friars the crosses were as diabolical as the witches and their spells, reason for which they decided to also burn them: “quemaronse tambien con lo demas estas supersticiones de brujos contra brujos diablos contra diablos: a estos llaman zaories”. In the well-known treatise of indigenous “superstitions” by Ruiz de Alarcón (1953), we find a quote dealing with the importance of crossroads. On them, the indigenous people had placed anthropomorphic “ídolos”, which were given offerings in order to prevent bad things from happening to those who were travelling:

“Suele auer en estos montones de piedra, y en los portillos y encrucijadas de los caminos algunos ydolos y piedras que tienen semejança de rostros, y a estos va enderezado el intento del que ofrenda pretendiendo que les sea favorable la deidad que creen reside allí o para que no les susceda mal en el viaje que hazen, o para tener cosecha, o para cosas semejantes, en especial los enfermos por consejo de sus sortilegos medicos que se lo aconsejan, y aun se, lo mandan, como lo han declarado ante mi, que lleban al rio candelas de cera y a bezes por los enfermos ba el médico, y echa las candelas en el río, o las lleva a los montes” (Ruiz de Alarcon, cited in Ponce 1987, vol. 4: Chapter 2).

## 8.2 *Kidney beans*

In Jinotega, kidney beans were used to prognosticate. Through these, you guessed deaths, births, travel and all kinds of events: “ [...] tenian otra superstizion de suertes con unos frijolillos colorados exquisitos / con que adeuinan muertes partos viajes buenos y malos sucesos y otras cosas con su diabolico engaño”.<sup>35</sup> We know that in Mesoamerica, until

now, it is customary “echar suerte” and make predictions based on the results of counting fists of corn or beans. The same is true in sixteenth century Yucatan, as Aguilar tells us:

“Son sortilegos, y echan suertes con un gran puño de maíz, contando de dos en dos, y si salen pares, buelue a contar una, y dos, y tres veces, hasta que salga nones, y en su mente lleva el concepto sobre que va la suerte, verbi gratia. Huyose una vez una niña de una casa, y la madre como India llamo a un Sortilego destos, y echo suertes sobre los caminos, y cupo la suerte a tal camino, y embiando a buscar la niña, la hallaron en el pueblo de aquel camino. Castigue a este sortilego, que era de un pueblo una legua de Valladolid, y examinandole de espacio, halle, que las palabras que dezia mientras contaua el maiz, no eran mas de dezir nones, o pares: Huylan nones: caylan pares, y no supo dezir, si inuocaua al demonio con ellas porque el Sortilego era simplicissimo, y casi tonto” (Ruiz de Alarcon, cited in Ponce 1987, vol. 6: 84)

In Nicaragua, the kernels suffered the same fate as the crosses. These, after being in the hands of the friars, were collected and burned, based on the moral that: “asta aqui puede llegar la maldad y engaño de estos barbaros” [loc cit] and because “de otra suerte no sacara fruto sino acompaña a la misericordia el vigor y castigo”.<sup>36</sup> Also, the friars were astonished at the customs of the people of Jinotega towards disease and death:

“[...] si estan enfermos la suerte para si an/ de vibir o morir si murio bañan el difunto y/ ponerle para el viaje si piden la suerte al /sabio, auinar no comer carne y sal y dejar dor/mir con sus mujeres los dias que les manda el sa/bio es Ynbiolable en ellos crrear y executar estos /abussos y otros agujeros supertiziosos: de que el zerro la quebrada el chaguite lagunas rios tienen su dueño que ynbia llubias o caussa tem/pestades”.<sup>37</sup>

## 9 CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that there were different stages of development in the process of relocation and conquest of the so-called ‘mountain people’ in the course of time. We have discussed the entry of the Spaniards and their euphoria to find large populations of ‘infidels’ to be converted to the faith and relocated physically. The Spanish immediately come to the conclusion that the only way to relocate these populations is by treating them well and as such seduce them to come and live near Spanish settlements. Through the interference of the religious orders they try to relocate the populations that they came across. The seduction consisted of exoneration of tributes, gifts (hats, mirrors, etc.), promises of livestock and land, the construction of houses and churches. All set up to ensure that all populations that stayed in their villages in the mountains would automatically also want to come down to the villages, be converted to the Christian faith and become easier to dominate, and eventually lead to more individuals from whom to collect taxes.

At first we saw that on several occasions, the politics of the conquerors gave good results. In the middle of the seventeenth century, nevertheless, the new towns began to lose populations. The promises were not fulfilled and the good treatments were only kept up in the initial stages. The maltreatments and abuses by the friars and conquerors were sheer endless, for which reason a significant part of the recently moved indigenous inhabitants decided to return to the mountains. The result is that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Spanish colonial grip on central Nicaragua becomes more and more difficult and costly; the interest of the Crown diminishes and the religious orders also become more pressed for resources and personnel. At the same time, the problem arises that the majority of the newly converted did not truly accept the Christian faith and instead maintained their own beliefs and celebrated them through their own traditions.

The above-mentioned indigenous elements such as omens, forms of statuary, and anthropomorphic crosses, permit us a small glimpse into the scenery of religious customs practised in this area around this colonial time period. Some evidence points to pan-American indigenous cultural aspects, such as for example the animated nature of hills, rivers and lagoons and their capacity to cause certain climatic phenomena. Several of these elements we can encounter throughout Central America as well, for example among the Talamanca indigenous communities in Costa Rica. There, the cave also was the most important place to establish communication between spirits and shamans.

The paucity of data on the indigenous cultural world, in both the archaeological and historical record complicates reaching a better understanding of indigenous society in central Nicaragua. Nonetheless, the ethnohistorical data presented here is indicative of the richness and durability of its cultural traits.

## Notes

1 See Van Broekhoven 2002 for a more extensive and encompassing data analysis.

2 “What is most feared [by the indigenous people], is to be treated badly by the Spanish”.

3 “More [than] three hundred Indians with their families [...] left their place of relocation (*reducciones*) and fled to the mountains”. In AGCA, A1.23.1519, f.213-214. When quoting a historical document we will present the original transcription. A translation to English is added in the pertaining footnote.

4 AGI, AG 162: 413r-415r (1680).

5 “those barbaric people who depose their native ferocity, [...] come as meek lambs to the flock of the church”. AGI, AG 183: fol 2r.

6 “because apparently these infidels received what they are taught, even to us with voluntariness and love”. AGI, AG 174, [1v] (1610).

7 “saw that without much contrariness and some cheerfulness revived our holy faith, I am trying to have them make their houses and churches in a comfortable place along the same river”. AGI, AG 174, exp s.n. [1v] (1615).

8 “[...] and I did not succeed not because when they sensed my they abandoned their houses and fled to mountains which are impenetrable.” AGCA, A1.12.77.633, [1r] (1726).

9 AGCA, A1.12.77.629.

10 AGI AG 183.

11 AGI, AG 162, 1531; CS 3:113-116.

12 “Fray Juan de Albuquerque of the Order of the Lady of Mercy says that in 1606, being commander of the convent of the community of Sébaco, jurisdiction of León [...] [he] found out that in the mountains near tauauaca close to the Muy Muy river, there were many infidel indigenous people, and he tried to send them a Christianized Indian named Don Diego Hernandez to persuade them to embrace the Holy Baptism [...] he then tried [...] and they brought it and told them that in this way would go the Heaven and would have communication with the other Indians and that Your Majesty would favor them and support them in all and that no one would abuse them, which they took well”. AGI, AG 174, exp s.n. [1v] (1615).

13 “[...] I left the Indian Don Diego because he served as interpreter, because, even though the language that he knew about [the one spoken in] the community of Sébaco was sometimes close in its vocabulary to his, it was not much to tell them and have them understand what it was he wanted and as such this Indian served as interpreter and because he had been the first of them to bring news he remained all the days that he could”. AGI, AG 174, exp s.n. [1v] (1615).

14 “Wherefore my community becomes depopulated for fear of not finding remedy or comfort or administration, nor priest to bury them [...]”. AGCA, A1.11.16.5802.48971, f.5r (1678).

15 AHC, Letra i, Leg.4, 11 [118r].

16 “[...] he was deceived by the Indians who took him through the woods for two or three nights, fooling him, and not wanting to discover the horrible cave that the devil sends them in not making it so horrible”. AHC, Letra i, Leg.4, 11 [118r].

17 “Fray Rodrigo, having left the mentioned town of Pueblo Nuevo and heading to Matagalpa and passing close to Sébaco, did not want to enter conduct the Holy mission, knowing the lack of success that could be achieved there, and came to Matagalpa [...]”. AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [118r-118v].

18 AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [123v-124r].

19 AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [119v].

20 AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [119v].

21 AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [119v].

22 AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [119v-120r].

23 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11: [120v].

24 ACG, Margíl de Jesús, ramo 4 estante R f.812r-812v.

25 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11:[121r].

26 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11:[121r].

27 "... The Andean cosmology had no notion of evil, embodied in a satanic being. In contrast, Andean philosophy implies a vision "dialectic" of the universe in which opposition forces were seen as reciprocal and complementary, necessary for the reproduction of society as a whole".

28 Demonology has its roots in Medieval Europe, and so do the social stereotypes of the witch and the warlock. These stereotypes were key to the construction of an ideology of political persecution. The image of the witch itself was developed within a local and narrow context, but soon took on a life of its own, becoming an integral part of European folk belief.

29 "[...] arriving at that Province [...] he found big ignorance in many people about the mysteries of the faith, he noticed that many do not know the Christian doctrine and this not only among the Indians, blacks, mulattos and Mezticos [...], but many Spaniards, children of those who have come to this Kingdom since its conquest [...]". AGC, A1.23.1520.71r (1672).

30 AGC, A1.23.1520.71r (1672).

31 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11:[124r].

32 "having seen how the Indians had martyred, killed and burnt an Indian called Salvador Ruiz, who was a good Christian and did not want to participate in this idolatrous practice." AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11:[120r].

33 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11:[123r].

34 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11:[123r-123v].

35 AHC, Letra i, Legajo 4, 11: [123v].

36 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11: [123v].

37 AHC, Letra I, Legajo 4, 11: [124r].

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Leg.: Legajo

f.: Folio

r.: recto

v.: verso

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