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Matthew Francis Rarey, *Insignificant Things. Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2023, Pp. xiii +288. ISBN 9781478019855. Price \$26.95 PB.

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The beginning of the 16th c saw the emergence of some interaction, apropos of trade, slavery, and later colonialism, between Portugal and Sudanic Africa. The interaction that lasted for over four centuries left various legacies on both sides of the Atlantic (1).

The title under review is the first published book by the highly cerebral Ohioan Afro-Atlantic visual art historian. It charts the transcultural course of *bolsas de mandinga* (pouches of amulets) as they appeared in Sudanic Africa and the South Atlantic during the *longue durée* of the Transatlantic Slavery, specifically from the 17th century in the Lusophone commonwealth up till the early Modern period. [The narrative cuts across the four parts of the world in which Africa served as the connecting node \(2\)](#). In other words, the Afro-Atlantic religious traditions and their apotropaic “power objects” of control and praxis in the context of slavery and its legacies constitute the core and kernel of this work. The Portuguese Inquisition (1536-1821) which was originally established to try “religious crimes” was made to cast its net wider to cover such other offences as sexual infractions, magic, witchcraft, and indeed all such practices and objects as were perceived to offer access to unseen power or knowledge which was used “to carry out such spiritual labour” (p. 13). An outcome of that extension is reflected in the archival reports and attachments of the Lisbon Inquisition Records from which the work under review has emanated.

The book consists of four chapters with an enlightened and enlightening introduction (pp. 1-27) which almost makes any review to verge on the superfluous. Chapter 1, “Labels” (pp. 31-71) analyses how, from the late 17th-century, the term *mandinga* (a corrupted form of the Senegambia ethnonym Mandinka) had been used in the Lusophone world and West Africa (since the 13thC) in reference to a range of amulets and other mechanisms of control of otherworldly powers which are attributable to enslaved or freeborn Africans. Nonetheless, the author brilliantly shows how amulets became an identity moniker for all, and indeed a material manifestation of Catholicism, Islam, and African creedal nodes. But the central figure here is Jacques Viegas from Mina, a term (most likely from the Arabic word *mīnā*’-seaport) used to describe

“captives who embarked on ships from present-day Benin and Togo” (p. 34). Jacques was brought to trial at the Lisbon Inquisition in 1704 for possession and/or acquisition of mandinga. Rarey shows how the clientele and commodification of mandinga, emerging as a defensive and punitive label and object, cut across religious, social, and racial divides, once their contents integrated and appropriated materials from Catholicism, Islam, indigenous Brazilian, African beliefs, and their cultural practices.

Chapter 2 “Contents” (pp. 72-123) illustrates how the contents of mandingas worked in conjunction with the external form that housed them. Rarey illustrates how the “strategic occlusion” of the contents, which assured their makers and peddlers a hieratic and sacerdotal status, bred the opprobrium and jealousy of their opponents, including state actors. Succinctly put, the chapter addresses three issues; viz, the political role of visual description of the protective elements of the mandingas, which description nonetheless occludes their activating contents; the elite valuations of religious objects and cultural hierarchies in the context of mandinga trade; and an analysis of the transactional life of José Francisco Pereira, “one of the most prolific and sought-after mandingueiros in Lisbon”. (p. 139). The chapter also discusses the pejorative terms in which the contents of the bolsa are described; viz, “unimportant detritus” (p. 76) which indicates “an explicit pact and friendship with the devil” (p. 72).

The author contextualizes here the “repressive desublimation”, to borrow from the Sociologist Herbert Marcuse, of the African power accession and dispensation tradition. Although bolsas are shown to have integrated and appropriated materials from European popular Catholicism, Islam, indigenous Brazilian, and African belief systems and their cultural practices, elements of negative and racialised discrimination in favour of non-African, specifically, white Catholic materials, are demonstrable. For instance, one Manuel João is reported to have been arrested in 1668 for wearing a pouch containing an “oration of Our Lady of Montserrat . . . that could free one from dangers . . . a torn piece of paper; another piece of paper containing pieces of Agnus Dei; a bit of garlic; two stalks of rue; and a bone the size of a fingertip, also wrapped in paper, which appeared to belong to some dead man for the bone appeared to still be fresh when it was wrapped.” (pp. 76-77).

In a 1727 testimony from Pernambuco, the white man João de Siqueira Castelo Branco, was accused of using a bolsa . . . containing “Communion cloths and purificators”—two types of objects distributed during Catholic masses—but his accusers described the other contents only as “other little things”. So, exotic items of Black provenance were interpreted pejoratively as “fetish” (*feitiçaria*) and characterised as “little” or “insignificant” things”. This kind of description in the court records, argues Rarey, is “representative of inquisitors’ disbelief in the apotropaic value of much of bolsas’ contents” (p. 77). In European or Lusophone narratives, similar configurations belonging in the Catholic tradition attracted

little or no censure, whereas those attributable to African sources generated, as earlier indicted, unpleasant characterisations.

Chapter 3, “Markings” (pp. 124-170). By this is meant the various models of chirographic (dis)enchantment mechanisms, such as orations, magical quadrants (*turabu/khatim*), amulets, potions (*eaux bénites*), often well-garnished with Qur’anic and/or Islamic cabalistic formulae images, for instance, Star of Solomon [*khatm Sulaymān* in Islamic occultism] murals, iron-branding, graffiti, and inscriptions of whatever origin or script as found on amulets or *cartas de tocar* (touch cards). The use of touch cards, especially by women wishing that certain men have illicit affairs with them is discussed in the context of other functions and types of the amulet tradition whose underlying purpose was to dominate others or prevent domination by others, that is, to “seal the body” against physical violence and malevolent spirits (p. 160).

Several archival documents and case studies constitute the main content of this chapter. An interesting anecdote here is how the appearance at Spain in 1231 of the Caravaca Cross, which is acknowledged in Catholicism as the *Vera Cruz* (True Cross- on which Jesus was believed to have been crucified), persuaded Zayd Abū Zayd (d. 1265), the last Almohad governor of Valencia, to convert to Catholicism in 1236 (p. 142). The explanation for this is to be sought in the belief in the miraculous and power-conferring significance of *lignum crucis*, that is, a wood fragment from *Vera Cruz*.

Chapter 4 “Results” (171-207) is about loyalty profiling of whatever unfamiliar items that were found with Africans, either in their homes or on their bodies shortly before or after the historic revolt of February 24-25, 1835, that is, the Malê Insurrection which was carried out to overcome the city’s security forces. In Brazilian and Lusophone discourse, Malê is the term for Sudanic African-born Muslims, whatever their original ethnic affiliation. The chapter illustrates how objects such as Muslim prayer beads or rosary (*tesuba*), writing slates, Qur’anic prayer books, fabric or leather amulets, Arabic scripted items, often in Maghribī hand, Islamic passages, and rings became “rebellious objects”. Moreover, the teaching and distribution of Arabic and Islamic ideas qualified anyone engaged in such to be brought to trial in 19th-century Brazil.

According to the author, although whites also wore amulets and rings in the late 18th -century, these were never stigmatised as instruments of rebellion. In other words, the perception of the danger of amulets was tied to the Africans’ racial identity (p. 79). Whether in the Yoruba wars of the late 18th century or the Bahia-Brazilian counterparts of the same period, it is established here that “leather amulets filled with Qur’anic papers became the critical currency of self-protection. . . from violence” (p. 184). From the testimonies of many of the suspects that were brought to trials at the Inquisition for being active participants in the Revolt, or identifying with it overtly, covertly, or by default, the narrative was that amulets in pouches were, on the part of the enslaved or manumitted

slaves, a medium for survival, security, and power accession either for apotropaic or aggressive purposes.

This was portrayed as a gendered subject under plantocracy and colonialism. On the other hand, the slavers, agents of the state, some aficionados of non-African belief systems, among others, portrayed amulets in a negative light as mélanges of fetish, indecipherable objects, even when such people benefitted from them or cultivated their uses, and were wont to constantly move “the goalpost of permissibility” (p. 10), for instance, by the Portuguese Catholicism, whenever it served their interest.

It is abundantly clear that archival materials, largely from the Inquisitions, provided the ingredients for this monumental work which is marked by an analytical rigour of remarkable character. Aside from José Francisco’s drawings and João da Silva’s petitionary prayers, writings, and formulae, Jacques Viegas’s mandinga pouch as afforded by the Inquisition Records offers the richest information concerning the material and intangible power accession objects produced by enslaved and free Africans anywhere in the world before the 19th century. It is significant to note that the dramatis personae in the narrative on amulets cut across several ethnic groups in Sudanic Africa; Hausa, Nago (Yoruba), and Borno (Kanuri), among others (3).

A slight peccadillo is that the language of the work can be sometimes convoluted and difficult to comprehend, thus making the tenor and train of argument or analysis not rarely stultifying. Nonetheless, this effort by Rarey has opened a new vista on scholarship and material culture of diaspora Sudanic Africans in the Lusophone world from their trade and slavery antiquity to the present. But there is a need to evaluate the surviving intellectual bequests of the post-Insurrection period in terms of their quality and thematic remit. There might be more items outside the archives accessed by the author which may be found in private hands or repositories, and it is to be hoped that this great effort by Rarey will be a great inspiration for avid explorers in the Trans-Atlantic knowledge heritage.

Cited References

¹ See Abdulkadir Inaltekin, “Western Colonialism. The Slave Trade and Genocide in Africa”, *SDE Akademi Dergisi*, 3, no 3, September 2023, 446-494.

² See Andrea Guerrero-Mosquera, “African Diaspora Protection: Amulets in New Spain, New Granada and the Caribbean”, *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 50, n.º 2 (2023): 285-319.

<https://doi.org/10.15446/achsc.v50n2.103038>.

³ Cf. Camille Lefevvre, “Hausa Diasporas and Slavery in Africa, the Atlantic, and the Muslim World”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.917>.

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