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Matthew Francis Rarey, *Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023. 304 pp. ISBN: 9781478019855, ISBN: 97812478017158, and ISBN: 9781478024422.

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Accused by the Portuguese Inquisition of being “insignificant things” in his new book, *Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Black Atlantic*, Matthew Francis Rarey shows that amulets known as *mandingas* or *bolsas*, used by Africans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for bodily protection across the Atlantic World, were anything but insignificant. Rarey argues that the circulation of *mandingas* in the Atlantic world and the medley of objects included in *mandingas*’ leather pouches “reveal the complex and mutual imbrication of cultural practices only later termed *African* and *European*” (p.5). In other words, *mandingas*’ contents complicated claims to authenticity and cultural origin. Rarey also posits that *mandingas* “interrogated elite assumptions about the spiritual and economic value of bodies and materials in the context of Atlantic slavery and mercantilism” (p. 5).

Using records from the Portuguese Inquisition in Lisbon, Rarey narrates the stories of Africans tried for possession of *mandingas*. Other scholars have written about *mandingas* or *bolsas* in the Atlantic World, for instance Laura de Mello e Souza’s *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross* (2003) and Daniela Buono Calainho’s *Metrópole das Mandingas* (2008). However, Rarey’s book seeks to develop the objects’ connection more fully to Africa. Rarey contends that his book “significantly expands and historicizes these objects African context,” to challenge conceptions of African cultures as static, (p.15). He seeks to place the conversation about *mandingas* use in Portugal and Brazil in conversation with their long and varied history on the African continent, particularly in West Africa

Rarey’s four chapters trace the history of *mandingas* chronologically and thematically. Chapter one interrogates the early history of the amulets in sixteenth century Senegambia and the process by which the objects came to be called *mandingas*. Chapters two studies the form and contents of the *mandingas*, evaluating the trial records of items contained within *mandinga* pouches. Chapter three and four look at the various uses of *mandingas* both for bodily protection, and as aids in rebellion. Ultimately, Rarey’s work succeeds in showing the varied uses of

mandingas and their importance as objects designed to evade scrutiny while providing an imperfect archive of enslaved lives in the Atlantic World.

In his first chapter, Rarey traces the diffusion of *mandingas* in West Africa through trade and religious contact. Mande traders, commonly called Dyula (Juula) in West Africa, played a large role in the dissemination of Islam and the use of *mandingas* in the region. The term *mandinga* is derived from the term for the Mandinka or Malinke people who live in many different countries of present-day West Africa. Rarey charts the various names that *mandingas* were called, noting that they were referred to as *gris-gris* in French, *tilasm* in Arabic, and widely across European languages as *fetisso*, *feitiço*, or *fétiche*. However, Rarey does not provide many African language terms for the amulets that came to be called *mandingas*. Rarey shows that *mandinga* was “a term of translation. It functioned to make widely diverse ritual material intelligible – and thus transferrable – across practices increasingly in conversation and conflict from across the Atlantic” (p. 57). While Rarey argues the term was a translation and a catch-all for the wide variety of apotropaic objects used across the Atlantic, one would have liked to hear more about the various African terminology for amulets. For instance, among the Wolof of Senegal multiple different terms refer to different types of amulets with different uses. Looking to African terminology for these objects might help to elucidate some of the differences that the term *mandinga* elides.

Rarey’s next chapter looks at the contents of *mandinga* pouches, some of which are preserved in the inquisition tribunal files in Lisbon. In this chapter, Rarey wonders how the practices of *mandingueiros* (*mandinga* makers) such as assemblage and mélange should be considered not just “as an index of their world, not as an effort to control it, but as a model for imagining it anew” (p.75). He shows how *mandingas* included a variety of objects, from paper, writings, and drawings to alter stones and the hair or teeth of animals. Interestingly, Catholic religious objects and symbols were often implanted in *mandingas*, baffling inquisitors. The contents of *mandingas* also reflected a debate around the value of objects. According to Rarey *mandingas*’ “apotropaic properties were intimately tied to the economic value” (p. 94).

Mandingas were designed to veil their contents, yet the files of the Lisbon tribunal often detailed their contents and therefore “unmake its power” (p. 80). Rarey provides the case study of José Francisco Pereira, whom he describes as one of the most prolific *mandinga* makers in Lisbon. Pereira was arrested by the Lisbon inquisition in 1730. He was born near the Bight of Benin in Africa but was enslaved and sent to Brazil. In his trial, Pereira claimed that it was in Brazil where he first heard of *mandingas*. Rarey shows how Pereira’s work confounded the distinction between African “fetishism” and Catholic iconography, but it also “served as a space

to forge the dynamic reinvention of his own experiences as reckoning with the daily realities of enslavement and displacement” (p.99).

In chapter three, entitled “Markings,” Rarey interrogates *mandingueiros* use of paper in amulet pouches. He suggests that “Mandinga-makers and users knew of the transformative role papers played for officials and elites, and that already in the early 18th century, they understood and strategically responded to contemporary arguments about the intimate relationships between racialized and other corporeality and spectacular violence” (p. 129). Rarey returns to the story of José Francisco Pereira, among others, to make this point. The mandinga pouch of Pereira contained writings, including Catholic prayers but also sometimes illegible thoughts in Portuguese. In this occasionally hard-to-read text, Pereira described his wishes and desires. Thus, not only did the pouches protect people from physical violence, inside the pouches “Africans desperately sought immediate responses to the violence around them” (p. 167).

In his final chapter, Rarey presents what he terms the “revolutionary aesthetics” of *mandinga* pouches (p. 207). In the chapter, he interrogates the “presumed rebelliousness of the objects used by Africans in early nineteenth-century Brazil” (p. 172). Rarey extends the argument to contend that the use of paper created spaces for Africans to contest the role of writing and their enslavement. However, in the nineteenth century the papers inside *mandingas* were interpreted as acts of revolt. Rarey uses the 1835 Revolt of the Malês to illustrate his point. Leather pouches with Arabic writing by Yoruba participants were found in the aftermath of the revolt. This led to regular police searches and seizures, making the owning of *mandingas*, especially ones with Arabic writing, suspect and rebellious in nature.

Overall, Rarey’s book is an important new investigation of the uses of apotropaic objects in the Atlantic World. The book’s strength lies in its apt analysis of both the external and internal contents of *mandingas*. Rarey also importantly documents the role of the interaction of Islam, Catholicism, and African religions in the production of *mandingas*. He shows how the objects were used as important protective mechanisms in the precarious world of the Atlantic and how *mandingas* offer the potential to “imagine other possible worlds” where “violence would not come to the enslaved” (p. 215). It is a book that should be read widely by historians, art historians, and scholars of religion.

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