



Un hombre de mucha trastienda or A Man of Many Backroom Dealings: Confidential Reports on the Life of Robert Hodgson Between the Spanish and English Atlantic Empires, 1767–1791¹

Un hombre de mucha trastienda: noticias reservadas sobre la vida de Robert Hodgson entre los imperios atlánticos de España e Inglaterra, 1767-1791

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Abstract

This article is about the news that came from the Englishman Robert Hodgson from Bluefields Bay, a territory disputed by England, Spain, and the Miskito Indians at the end of the 18th century. In the letters and relations with which Hodgson was spied on, it is possible to unveil the life and representations of cultural mediators, their conflicts, alliances, and survival strategies. The spies, the rumors, and the fear to these men allow for understanding the capacity that the English and Spanish governments had to seek to take advantage of alliances that, at times, were ambivalent. For this, then, it is necessary to follow the “most secretive” news of those who were considered allies and confront them with those who were in charge of watching and spying on the new vassals of the monarch. It was, above all, a global situation that produced an infinity of information that, despite being loaded with meanings contrary to loyalty and interests of these cultural mediators, made it possible to have news about smuggling, the colonization of new territories and the political mechanisms to win allies, integrate or expel them.

Keywords: frontiers, Atlantic history, espionage, circulation of information, colonial wars.

Resumen

Este artículo trata sobre las noticias reservadas que llegaron sobre el inglés Robert Hodgson desde la bahía de Bluefields, territorio disputado por Inglaterra, España y los indios Miskitos a finales del siglo XVIII. En las cartas y relaciones con las que se espiaba a Hodgson es posible desvelar la vida y las representaciones sobre los mediadores culturales, sus conflictos, alianzas y estrategias de supervivencia. Los espías, los rumores y el temor a estos hombres permiten entender la capacidad que tenían los Gobiernos inglés y español para buscar aprovechar alianzas que por momentos eran ambivalentes. Para esto, entonces, es necesario seguir las noticias “reservadísimas” de quien se consideraba aliado y confrontarlas con quienes estaban encargados de vigilar y espiar a los nuevos vasallos del monarca. Se trató ante todo de una situación global que produjo infinidad de información que, a pesar de estar cargada de sentidos contrarios sobre la fidelidad y los intereses de estos mediadores culturales, permitía tener noticias ciertas sobre el contrabando, la colonización de nuevos territorios y los mecanismos políticos para ganar aliados, integrarlos o expulsarlos.

Palabras clave: fronteras, historia atlántica, espionaje, circulación de información, guerras coloniales.

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Introduction

"I took a leap from England to Spain and with me leapt my honor as well."

Robert Hodgson

This article deals with the confidential news that arrived regarding the Englishman Robert Hodgson from Bluefields Bay, a territory disputed by England, Spain, and the Miskito Indians at the end of the 18th century. By approaching the reserved letters left by spies and Hodgson himself, we intend to understand the geopolitical tensions of the Spanish and English monarchy from the life itineraries of a cultural mediator (O'Phelan and Salazar-Soler, 2005) or liminal subject, as identified by Diana Roselly Pérez in her study on border relations between the French, Portuguese, and Tupinambás in Brazil (Pérez Gerardo, 2021, pp. 211- 240). In both cases, exchanges, marital, political or symbolic alliances give a unique experience to people moving through a common territory that is the scene of imperial disputes.

There is a reduction of scale that seeks to understand the connections between individuals and society, taking into account the opinions generated from the institutional and literary spheres, to the particular testimonies that remained of conversations, letters, and reports of viceroys, governors, sailors, and spies who tried to give an account of the ideas and daily life of men of recent loyalty to the Spanish monarch (Ruiz Ibáñez, 2022). Although Robert Hodgson insisted, in his letters, that he wanted to take revenge on his former nation, that he was the "most faithful servant" of the Spanish Crown, and that the leap he had made between England and Spain was above all to save his honor, doubt did not cease to assail governors and viceroys who constantly received his news. This was not a particular situation; the construction of merit and services to the king went through an intricate world of obtaining information in which doubt prevailed over certainty. In the cities, outsiders spent years contributing to the neighborhood and seeking to occupy a prominent place in festivities and honorable positions in order to reach the neighbor status (Herzog, 2006). More forewarned, testimonies about Indian allies were fraught with ambivalence and a constant vacillation between fidelity and betrayal. However, despite the fear and distrust of the king's new vassals, the value of the information and experience they brought to the government and to the expansion of the Hispanic monarchy in the global arena prevailed (Ruiz Ibáñez, 2022).

Historiography has dealt with Colonel Robert Hodgson as a cultural mediator who helped in the colonization of the Central American territory. The documents produced by the Hodgson family and the contemporaries who followed their life itineraries have allowed for an in-depth analysis of the processes of colonization and trade, especially smuggling (Polanco and Sanchez, 1991, pp. 171-184). One of the fundamental episodes for American historiography has been the wars and alliances between the Spanish, English, and Miskito Indians during the 17th and 18th centuries (García, 1999, pp. 95-121). Of this aforementioned sphere of negotiations, smuggling is the one that has drawn the most attention, showing a social plurality of renegade lives, and licit and illicit practices typical of a frontier space (Gómez, 2018, p. 215). Although these are itineraries of “marginal” lives, on the edge of treason and distancing from the legal culture, they show a great capacity for social and spatial mobility, as well as a political culture far from the idea of direct rule between the king and his vassals (Ruiz Ibáñez, 1995).

Although case studies in these territories with diffuse territorialization focused on conflicts, the eagerness for survival and adaptation to the circumstances of life created, in the cities, a melting pot of conspiracy situations, rumors, and fears that revealed illicit and extreme political practices. In the ambivalent and itinerant aspects of the life of Robert Hodgson, cultural mediator and smuggler between the Spanish and English colonies, a certain detachment for belonging to one group or another can be intuited, in spite of the fact that in his letters he always advocated to be heard in the high courts. Like other people, he always sought to defend his most immediate interests and his *native land*, that is, his place of birth, acting on different sides according to the political, social, and economic circumstances imposed by the context. Hence the weight of the testimonies of men who moved between Europe and America, from port to port, smuggling and negotiating with different groups and governments, are exceptional. Such is the case of the Hodgson family, who for more than a century accumulated a deep experience on business and politics in a vast territory of the Caribbean coast, especially between the bay of Honduras and the provinces of Costa Rica (Gómez, 2018, p. 215). It is necessary, then, to emphasize the production and circulation of information not only from the central places of the monarchies, but also from their fringes, and, especially, from neighboring territories. In this regard, the Hodgson family, while attempting to stay out of English and Spanish control, negotiated and attracted the Miskito Indians. What seemed to be a chaotic and elusive process, in reality, had a complex system of obtaining and receiving information (González, 2021, pp. 567- 596). After the negotiation and acceptance of a new ally,

an exhaustive investigation began on the actions or expected effects with them, a situation in which spies, visitators, governors, viceroys, and even the Council of the Indies, intervened (Brendecke, 2012). From this experience, and on local and global scales, constant communication was established, which was essential to maintain or push back the intentions of domination of one or another empire over a disputed territory.

Therefore, it is possible to understand the circulation of information between disputing and negotiating sides from the letters, relations, and other records that reached the Secretary of War of the Spanish Crown, and which rest in the General Archive of Simancas. In this case, we are interested in the way in which the Hodgson family was involved in the intricate commercial and negotiation business on the Mosquito Coast, the imperial tensions that arose in local spheres due to the global conflict between Spain and England, and, finally, to be able to follow the testimonies of Robert Hodgson and the spies that watched him as a way to understand the modalities of affiliation and opposition to the monarchic governments.

The Pitt-Hodgson Family on the Mosquito Coast

The arrival of English settlers to the Mosquito Coast was propitiated by the failure of Hispanic settlement in the American rainforests and lowlands. The Spanish had not been able to colonize, since the 16th century, the territories dominated by the *Miskito* Indians and the *Maroons* who had settled in the jungle territory. By the time the Crown became interested in strengthening trade along the Central American coast and inland, it encountered great opposition from *Zambos* and *natives* allied with the English. That is to say, the latter went ahead to establish a lucrative trade while gaining allies against the Spanish. At the beginning of the 17th century, only a few merchants were transporting dyes, woods, and “other merchandise” (Ibarra Rojas, 2011, p. 80). The situation generated so much concern in the following decades that, in 1785, the viceroy of the New Kingdom of Granada, Antonio Caballero y Góngora, sent up to 1,000 men, “between regulars and militiamen,” to the Isthmus of Panama and the Darién to control smuggling and block trade between the Indians and foreign nations (Kuethe, 1993, p. 285). The settlement that had previously been in the hands of captains and religious orders now passed into the hands of the military with central government orders that were to defend the jurisdiction of the Crown.

From 1630 to 1690, the English went from considering their incursions into Central America and the Caribbean as simple raids against territories forgotten

by the Spanish to a more systematic colonization and settlement project. The Providence Company, founded by Puritans, planned and established new guidelines for the establishment of agricultural plantations in places where commercial relations between the English and *natives* were taking place (Newton, 1985, pp. 11-12). This was one of the first steps to strengthen cultural ties with the population settling on the frontiers of the Hispanic monarchy. The subsequent intention was to establish a secular and ecclesiastical government in small enclaves. This policy of occupation of the territory was accompanied by piracy raids centered on the island of Jamaica -since the mid-17th century-, a central place in the Caribbean to establish or block nautical routes for and against enemies (Gómez, 2018, p. 218). The reaction of the Spanish Crown was not long in coming, but well into the 18th century, these new English settlement processes strengthened the Hispanophobia of Indians and Zambos well established in the territory.

By 1631, the English had begun to colonize San Andres and Providence. Sussex Cammock, who had been among the first men to make incursions into the West Indian islands, *inland*, continued to settle on behalf of King Charles I (1625-1649), establishing the settlement of Gracias a Dios, located on the Mosquito Coast. The coastal areas of the Yucatan province also received members of the Puritan company, who established settlements, such as Belize, as early as 1638. At the end of the century, English populations reached the Darien, a border territory between the cities of Nombre de Dios and Panama and the governorate of Choco in the New Kingdom of Granada. There, they established New Calidonia, from they were able to raid and trade with the Cuna Indians through a route on the Atrato River. This last foundation increased the concern of the local authorities of Cartagena for territorial control and of the *natural* population, making journeys and relations to hinder the British advance more frequent (Gómez, 2008, p. 154).

At the end of the 18th century, according to the population census of the Mosquito Coast, there were approximately 10,000 Zambos and “moscos” living together with some 400 Englishmen (Sánchez, 1967, p. 1207). The *natural* and Zamba population had adopted the English language, and they had established commercial relations with the British Crown, thus legitimizing the possession of the inhabited territory since the 17th century. This entire population, divided and controlled by chiefdoms, allowed for the establishment of English superintendents who were sent from Jamaica, and who fulfilled the role of mediators between the colonists and the *natives*. These were men with great experience in commerce and knowledge of the territory or, at least, willing to remain there until they achieved it.

One of the first settlers of the Mosquito Coast with this title was William Pitt. He had moved from the island of Bermuda, where his grandfather was governor, to settle in Honduras, and, later, on the Mosquito Coast in the 1730s. Like other English residents, he began the exploitation and trade of timber, such as mahogany, and sarsaparilla crops from the Black River to Cape Gracias a Dios, with which he managed to amass a large fortune (Vidal and Román, 2022, p. 49). In one of his approaches to the Indian territories, he managed to bring with him a Spanish woman who was a captive, with whom he married and had four children, among them Elizabeth, the future wife of Robert Hodgson *the Elder* (Sánchez Pedro, 1967, p. 1215).

Although consulted sources, both primary and secondary, do not specify why the Indians agreed to give this woman to William Pitt, it was most likely a gesture of friendship and a strengthening of political and commercial relations, as practiced by various pre-Hispanic societies before the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century. There is no doubt that the superintendent managed to maintain a stable and peaceful relationship with the population of the Mosquito Coast until his death, when the chiefdoms that had been left in charge of Robert Hodgson revolted.

By the time Hodgson *the Elder* assumed the superintendency by appointment from Governor William Trelawney of Jamaica, the Miskito King, Edward I, also recognized him as his commander (Gómez, 2018, pp. 224-225). However, tensions between the two monarchies led to the family claiming the provenance of Elizabeth Pitt's mother. The family was, then, able to settle in the islands of Santa Catalina, Hispanic jurisdiction, when necessary. Thus, the family's capacity for spatial mobility transcended jurisdictions, conflicts, and governments, and, in each of them, they could appeal to a tradition of negotiations, and, even more so, to lineages found in border situations such as those that were propitiated in the Mosquito Coast. In this context, from the marriage between Elizabeth Pitt and Robert Hodgson *the Elder*, four children were born on the Mosquito Coast, one of them, Robert Hodgson *the Younger*.

Hodgson's appointment as superintendent of the Mosquito Coast was due to the Treaty of Versailles signed between Spain and England. This had brought consequences for the family, since they had had to move to the island of Santa Catalina, a Spanish dominion, where Elizabeth Pitt requested asylum because of her Spanish descent on her mother's side. Did this circumstance influence Robert Hodgson *the Younger* to later switch to the Spanish side?

Robert Hodgson was born on the Mosquito Coast in 1715, and later traveled to England, where he was educated, between 1746 and 1749, at the Woolwich Military Academy (Gómez, 2010, p. 213). When he returned to Central America, his father was superintendent of the Mosquito Coast, which allowed him to combine his European academic experience with his father's administrative experience in America. The privilege of being able to be educated in European academies was common among the elite of both empires, but with a firm Creole consciousness; a situation that would give foundation to diverse enlightened projects that went from the conception of geographical works to the formulation of new human histories in which the role of the Americans increasingly occupied a central place. Did his education in Europe give Robert Hodgson a broader vision of the American territory that would allow him to have a more global vision of the conflicts and of belonging to a certain monarchical community?

Robert Hodgson *the Younger* maintained the business and relationships he had inherited from his father. Their commercial network in the Caribbean and Europe included a market that included cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Kingston, London; and, clandestinely, Spanish cities such as Guatemala, Mérida, Havana, Santo Domingo, Portobelo, and Cartagena (Gómez, 2010, pp. 213-214). To paraphrase Anthony Pagden: *he was a lord of the whole world* (Pagden, 1997), an aspect that the viceroy of the New Kingdom of Granada, Don Antonio Caballero y Góngora, very well appreciated. Although, if one thinks of his personal survival strategies, it can be said that he defended his interests based on the power he had woven in the Caribbean and the mainland. At the end of the 18th century, he possibly only wanted to remain in his house in Bluefields, trading and exploiting the products of the land. So, to the previous questions, we must add another one: did Colonel Robert Hodgson always put the interests of his *natural homeland* before those of both Crowns?

Between 1767 and 1775, Robert Hodgson was in charge of the Superintendence of the Mosquito Coast (Floyd, 1967, p. 214). He knew the territory very well, and he made a geographical account of it, which he sent to London in 1757, noting a large number of trees, dyes, resins, and other resources that he himself exploited (Gurdián, 2014, pp. 85-105). As for his relationship with the Zambo King, George I, it is known that he was one of the main reasons why Viceroy Caballero y Góngora decided to charge him with the population and the maintenance of the village of Bluefields at the end of the 18th century. Thus, every superintendent of the Mosquito Coast was able to stay in the territory thanks to the long-standing alliance with

the Zambo kings. To get an idea of this familiar experience, it is worth quoting the official communication with which Bernardo Troncoso notified the president of the Audiencia de los Confines of the death of Robert Hodgson, which occurred on June 6, 1791. Troncoso began by lamenting that the latter had not responded to his letters, and asked about Bluefields Bay, a situation that was also noted by the president of the Audiencia in the margin with the notation “principal”². With the death of one of these *baqueanos*, conflicts with allies could begin, and trade routes and practical knowledge necessary to incursion into new frontiers of the territory could be lost.

Hence, the circulation and control of information had a prominent place in any circumstance of people’s lives in the old regime. These papers, with all kinds of news and formats, could be a safe passage from one frontier to another, or could instantly condemn the life of a person. In this regard, it is worthwhile to stop and look at the documents that were seized in January, 1783, from Robert Hodgson *the Younger*, who was taken prisoner to the port of Cartagena on suspicion of espionage. He had, with him, extensive documentation on the Mosquito Coast, including a dozen maps of the ports, rivers, natural resources, among other aspects of the geography and situation of the territory. Like his father, this man was well known in the Caribbean for his vast experience in dealing with the Indian population, and he was well acquainted with the trade routes, *inland and out to sea*.

Once the news reached the viceroy of the New Kingdom of Granada, Don Antonio Caballero y Góngora, he ordered the immediate translation of all the gathered information, including the cartographic notes, in order to establish the intentions of this English merchant and *baqueano*. Among the papers, there was a plan of attack on the Caribbean ports dominated by the Spanish Crown, which set off alarms about new attempts to take territory from the Spanish monarch. In the report, it can be inferred that this merchant had not only dedicated himself to the counter side and to maintaining stable relations with the indigenous population in the Mosquito Coast, but that, over the years, he had achieved “in these kingdoms, many memoirs, papers, maps, etc., relative to the most considerable positions of the Spanish possessions in the West Indies” (Gómez, 2010, p. 215). All this information, at the time of his capture, was already in the “Ministry”, as reported by Hodgson himself.

2 Archivo General de Simancas (AGS), SGU, Leg. 6949, 16, f. 1r [added].

It is certain that he was not the only Englishman to prowl the Caribbean for these purposes, nor was he the only one captured. However, it is important to call attention to the experience this man had gained, not only in trade, but also in his dealings with the Miskito Indians in Central American territory. The English, Scots, and French were able to establish commercial and political relations with groups that had been opposing Spanish rule since the 16th century. Therefore, it should not be paradoxical that Viceroy Antonio Caballero y Góngora decided to grant him the expedition and organization of a settlement in Bluefields Bay, from which he would be in charge of colonizing and exploiting the land that was controlled by the Miskito Indians, in this case, in favor of the Spanish Crown.

The adverse situation of capture on suspicion of espionage, reinforced by the number of documents he was carrying, led Robert Hodgson to agree to change sides. Apparently, the Englishman had the ability to demonstrate that he could serve the Spanish Crown as he had served the English, as long as he was allowed to remain in Bluefields. So, he was sent with rights and privileges over the Spanish, Indian, and English colonists who still remained in the port. He, then, went from serving the British Empire to being *the most faithful servant* of the Spanish monarch. However, the follow-up by his companions, describing his actions and keeping the viceroy informed through confidential channels, opens up a range of possibilities for understanding the viceroy's intentions. It could be generally stated that the officer's efforts were aimed at uncovering the conspiracies of the English through Robert Hodgson, first by using the information gathered to strengthen American ports, and second, by taking advantage of his experience in the Mosquito Coast to the benefit of the Spanish Crown, as England had also done. In other words, it would seem that the aim was to take advantage of all the knowledge and information he had gathered to the detriment of the Spanish, but now, it could be used to strengthen and defend against a possible new attack on Spanish coasts.

Diverse Views Among Imperial Tensions of the American Caribbean

In 1778, Don Francisco Álvarez noted, in the preliminary discourse of his book *Noticia del establecimiento y población de las colonias inglesas en la América septentrional...*, that the “curiosity and desire to learn” about England's colonies in America was “almost general among all” Spanish subjects. The author was referring to an atmosphere of generalized opinion due to the tensions between the two Atlantic empires. From wars to treaties, and from smuggling to the opening of trade, the waters of the Atlantic were churning in different directions according to the relations established by the two European empires.

In the historical archives of Spain and America, we can hear some voices of sailors and merchants who, in the squares of Panama or Portobelo, during the feasts, confronted in their conversations the actions of the governments. Possibly, they also talked about religion, and, especially, they gave their opinion on the advantages and disadvantages of trade between the Spanish Crown and England. Even the officials of the Crown shared these concerns and took them to the King's desks. From the viceroyalty of the New Kingdom of Granada, prosecutor Don Francisco Moreno y Escandón was one of those officials who decided to give his opinion and inform the monarch of his views on the English. After explaining the benefits offered by the geography of the new colonies, the vitality and size of their ports, he indicated that "like a growing thorn that will pierce in time the heart and vital parts of the commerce of Mexico..." and the other Spanish ports, the English frigates were getting richer from their provinces than the Spaniards from their own (Colmenares, 1989, t. 1, p. 175). The officer was not only referring to the legal and illegal commerce practiced by the Americans in the Atlantic, his main concern was the number of colonies established in the Antilles and the mainland, where they had fortified ports such as San Juan, Bluefields, Puerto de Perlas, Cabo Gracias a Dios, Trujillo, and others. They were all colonies that had begun as small clandestine ports in the 1630s, and in less than a century, had gained enough fame for "all of Europe" to "set its eyes" on England in the 18th century (Alvarez, 1778, p.175). The quantity of maps produced by Robert Hodgson *the Younger* alone gives us to understand that the Caribbean had become a highly prized booty. This is how Antonio Álvarez put it in 1778:

All public papers and private notices no longer deal particularly with any other subject; the names of its principal cities, its ports, rivers, and lands are heard and read at every step, becoming common to all, whereas before they were only known to the learned; the news of that continent is eagerly awaited and listened to with admiration... (Alvarez, 1778, p. 3).

The same variety of news was received in London and the North American colonies. The main concern was, possibly, the measures that the Hispanic monarchy was adopting to curb the illicit trade and relationship that the English were maintaining with Zambos, Miskito Indians, and Spaniards. In 1750, for example, the news that armaments were being prepared in Spain to be sent to America to attack the Indian establishments with the purpose of stopping the illicit trade of the English publicly circulated among the merchants who had interests on the other side of the Atlantic. The news that were made known by a London merchant who received a letter indicating "that the governor had dispatched a corporal with

fifty men to warn said Indians” came to move papers among the King’s high officials, who requested that “acts of good will” be carried out, in this case freeing captive Spaniards, to appease tensions between Spain and England (Feliciano, 1990, p. 140).

This last case enables us to understand how the atmosphere of opinion created fears and rumors that could quickly affect the politics and the relationship established between the Spanish Crown and England. It could be said that the work of Don Antonio de Alcedo y Herrera entitled *Piraterías y agresiones de los ingleses y de otros pueblos de Europa en la América Española*, in which, in an almost ironic way, the author recalls how William Blackstone, “concrete and sober as a good Saxon”, defined piracy as “an offense to the most sacred laws of society”, while his government favored and benefited from the actions of the latter in the Antilles (De Alcedo y Herrera, 1883, pp. 1-2; Pérez Morales, 2012, pp. 45-76).

Alcedo y Herrera’s statement was based on the continuous attacks suffered by the ports of Spanish America since the 16th century by the English, French, and Dutch. The dispute for the defense of the ports had passed in the 18th century to the mainland, where colonies were located, and quickly entered into political and commercial negotiations with frontier and “uprising” populations, such as the Zambos and the Miskito Indians of Central America. The forging of these new enclaves became increasingly evident when the Indians began to shoot Spanish merchants and missionaries, whose task it was to expand the frontier of the monarchy, with arquebuses. When news came that the Indians were increasingly against Spanish colonization, and they spoke more English than Spanish, English ships reached the port of Havana aiming to take the city. In this context, the force of his words must be appreciated when trying to explain the ambiguity with which the English were taking control of the Caribbean.

Both Antonio Álvarez’s and Dionisio de Alcedo’s proposals attempted to respond to the concerns that the royal officials and the American population were experiencing on a day-to-day basis, in a century driven by territorial and commercial disputes between the main European powers. However, the barriers set by the treaties and laws issued by both governments did not represent the different conditions and experiences of the Americans in the 18th century. As previously mentioned, trade and smuggling between the Spanish and the English was commonplace, even if forbidden. Moreover, allegiance and sides changed according to the circumstances at hand, that is, in a period when, from one province to another,

from port to port, and island to island, flags changed, and Englishmen and Spaniards acted on different sides to survive and maintain their interests.

A microhistorical exercise on the life of Colonel Robert Hodgson can help us understand the ways in which people reacted and confronted the political circumstances of their time. His insertions into the economic life of empires, by bringing their “interests” in trade and colonization to the forefront, offer an alternative view to that which historiography has posited with the official information produced by the wars and subsequent treaties (see Pearce, 2007). Thus, by drawing attention to the fine print that rests in an epistle, a travel report, or an official document, loaded with terms that refer to doubt, rumor, fear, we are able to better understand the representations that a society made of the group it considered as its marginalized (Elias, 1998, pp. 81-82).

This proposal does not seek to make intransigent dichotomies; on the contrary, it seeks to better connect the networks of information that circulated between the two subjects from different socio-political scales. For this reason, some aspects of Robert Hodgson’s life deserve close observation. Among the main reasons, his participation in favor of both crowns in different periods, but in the same historical moment. Likewise, his actions, rather than being totally questioned, were rather used to the benefit of the English and the Spanish. The former, securing the settlement they had on the Mosquito Coast, and the latter, taking advantage of the experience that this man and his family had gained on the frontier. Finally, the uncertainty and distrust that was never left out of dealing with individuals such as Hodgson offer some clues to the issue of conspiracies and espionage as a practice that responded to an increasingly fluid and porous communication between the different cultures that were part of the “theater of operations” of the American 18th century.

News of the English Colonel Robert Hodgson Among the Spanish People

The capture of Colonel Robert Hodgson in 1783, and his subsequent oath of allegiance to the Catholic king, occurred in a climate of extreme opinion and tension, a circumstance that offers valuable insights into the lives of men and women on the fringes of the Atlantic empires. The actions of Viceroy Antonio Caballero y Góngora indicate a keen interest on the part of royal officials to provide themselves with men of experience who would keep them one step ahead of their competitors’ decisions in trade and in the possession of new territories. On the other hand, the arguments of the president of the audience of Guatemala in a confidential com-

munication with the Viceroy and the King allow us to understand the cautions and misgivings that were held against these people who made the frontiers imagined by the monarchies more and more porous. That is to say, most of the resulting documentation shows that the Spanish Crown had an open policy that sought to strengthen itself in the face of a stronger and expanding enemy, while, at the same time, maintaining caution and doubting the actions of men such as Robert Hodgson *the Younger*, who had gone from informing the British Crown on Spanish America -news such as the plan to attack Spanish ports in the Atlantic - to become the *most faithful servant of his Catholic Majesty*.

Once Caballero y Góngora released Robert Hodgson and sent him back to Bluefields Bay, with a detachment of Spaniards, to reestablish him on behalf of the Spanish Crown, he began to correspond with President Josef de Estacheria, who sent a spy to deliver news of the new vassal. The person chosen for this task was Colonel Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada. In May of 1787, he described, to the president of Guatemala, the first impression that Colonel Hodgson gave him in the following terms: “In the little that I dealt with him, I conceived that he is a man of much backroom, but I do not dare to say that of equal good faith”³.

Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada was sent to Bluefields to closely follow the actions of the colonel, now in the service of the Spanish king. The tone in which he gave the news shows a permanent distrust, especially in the concerning to the information the royal officials hoped to obtain on illicit trade and strategies to establish good relations with the Indians and Zambos of the Mosquito Coast. Arriving by surprise, the president’s spy found two “sheds or Barracones among *piraguas* of all sizes, canoes, and *pipantes*”, of the latter, he mentions some 27. The men that Hodgson kept at his disposal and service numbered over a hundred, including Spanish servants, mestizos, and black slaves, totaling some 1204. With this, Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada was trying to indicate that the colonel was taking advantage of the benefits that the Viceroy had given him to maintain a monopoly on trade and relations with the English and Indians from Bluefields.

But the main reason for the trip, as the spy himself explained, was to get closer to Hodgson’s true intentions to change sides. For this reason, in one of the conversations he documented for the President, and which were copied to Viceroy Atonio Caballero y Góngora, he described him as a man very driven by his

3 A.G.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 3r.

4 A.G.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 3r.-v.

interests, and, at the same time, mysterious and uneasy concerning the presence of the unexpected visitor in Bluefields. So, the distrust was mutual, to such an extent that it seemed that Hodgson preferred to live isolated in his lucrative business, and to communicate only what was convenient to keep the interests of the audiences and viceroyalties at a prudent distance. This is how Quesada describes the colonel's behavior:

In the conversations I had with him, he told me, clearly, that he did not expect me, nor that there would be any other commissioner on the coast other than him, especially from Cabo de Gracias to the S [South] that in this intelligence, and that in return of mail he was to have the rank of Brigadier, and the Government of the whole of it, independent, had been left to him in the service of Spain, and that he had already begun, by the Council of the Viceroy, to write to the *most excellent* Marquis of Sonora; that his desire is to serve only five years to our Sovereign//in which he hopes to become powerful, since he remains only cutting timber, which now has little value in England, and keeping it until the many that are now going are consumed, at the end of said time, with the permission that he has ample to deal with both nations, he will achieve the indicated end.⁵

This quote is a clear example of how the idea of the conspirator began to be created from the news (Kaiser and Linton, 2007, pp. 127-149). In this case, it is considered that there are several aspects that must be taken into account to understand the author's intentions. The letter indicates that the opinions expressed are the product of a conversation, with which the spy sought to exempt himself, ideologically, and to give a neutral background to the content in which he is merely a recipient of information. When he alludes to expressions such as "he told me, clearly", he intends to give the greatest possible veracity to the testimonies he mediated for the President and the Viceroy. Finally, the certainty with which he closes the testimony indicating the fragility of the relations established between Hodgson and the Spanish Crown, when he indicates that he was only going to serve the king for five years; and, likewise, the allusion to the autonomy he enjoyed to trade allows us to consider that Robert Hodgson was not a welcome man in the provinces of Guatemala among the Spanish population.

Possibly, the information has veracity with respect to the colonel's intentions, giving an idea that he was a man detached from the policies of each crown, and, hence, easily passed from one side to the other. But even so, it cannot be de-

5 A.G.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 3v.-4r.

nied that the conversation and possibly the questions that guided it were aimed at discovering a traitor or spy who had earned the viceroy's mercy to continue acting in favor of the English. In the days that Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada remained in the port of Bluefields, he reinforced the idea that the new vassal of the Crown kept secrets and pursued interests outside the service of the King. In the same letter to Josef de Estacheria, he insisted that Robert Hodgson "could not be persuaded to write to Your Lordship", and that the documents he had in his possession were only shown to him in "scraps". During his stay, the colonel tried to keep him away from the most trusted people in his service, since he "had two captains of ships there, one Catalan and the other American, whom he was hiding from me, and when I asked him about them, he said he had them outside, and he did not let me see them nor his wife"⁶. The situation became more tense as Hodgson began to treat his guest without the correct distinctions, in this case, at table time, where it seemed that the spy criticized the lack of Spanish customs when serving him dishes typical of the land. This is how Quesada describes it:

I observed that he had no bread, so I made him bring some fresh bread from the Goleta in the morning, with a few carafes of wine and a flask of liquor, but nevertheless, and having an innumerable stock of // all poultry and livestock, he fed me turtle and roasted plantain.⁷

Although it could be an affront against Spanish customs, as interpreted by Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada, in reality it was a way of showing the daily life of the families in the territory.

In spite of all this dubious news, the spy colonel closed his report by alluding to the importance of Robert Hodgson in bringing the Zambos and Indians of the Mosquito Coast into the service of the Spanish monarch. From the Tinto River, on June 30, 1787, the "most reserved" news confirmed the viceroy's decisions to release and allow the former superintendent of Bluefields to continue dealing with the Miskitos. Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada also ended up being convinced, in spite of the dealings and intrigues he had generated, that "nevertheless // everything in the day, I consider him useful, because he has dominion over the Indians, and wishes to take revenge on the English, but it is necessary to live very carefully with him, since he considers himself a small King of his island varataria"⁸.

6 A.C.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 4v.-5r.

7 A.C.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 4v.-5r.

8 A.C.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 5r.-v.

According to the report of the conversations of the spy of the president of Guatemala with Robert Hodgson, he was a man of cold and calculating character who was only interested in his own benefit, be it at the expense of the British or Spanish monarchy. In his eagerness to demonstrate his ambition and the lucrative trade served him, he notes that he was even “capable of selling his father”⁹. However, it seems that the ambition and the consciousness of belonging to the group of established men that Quesada exercised over the new vassal of the Catholic king allowed for the inclusion of cultural, economic, and geopolitical aspects that possibly guided the appraisals of this type of officer in the conversation. I am referring, mainly, to the sociocultural aspects involved in confronting two people who had been involved in the imperial quarrels between Spain and England throughout the 18th century. In this case, the awareness of belonging through customs, religion, or language was heightened by political confrontations. On a smaller scale, the autonomy of the local elite in all viceroyalties always motivated disagreements with newcomers, whether they were *visitadores*, intendants, or any official who might interfere with the status and privileges of older neighbors.

It is most likely that Colonel Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada acted in all these respects, as did other Spaniards. For example, a year after (1788) he visited Bluefields, one of Robert Hodgson’s vessels was intercepted by several royal officers from Portobelo. It was a small sail called *Our Lady of Conception*, from which several documents were seized, including the ship’s logbook, in which the itinerary of the crewmen could be followed. During the interrogation of the captain in charge, William Colley, he inquired about the origin and destination of the ship, about the quarrels between the English and the Spanish, and, more particularly, about the opinion held in the Caribbean about the actions of Colonel Hodgson. The conclusion was that his interests were not favorable to either side of the English and Spanish. For example, in Jamaica, a gazette had brought to light the news about Hodgson’s oath of allegiance to the King of Spain, news that among the sailors and port officers left many doubts, and, apparently, even resentment. In the aforementioned case of Portobelo, when Colley tried to defend his interests by indicating that Robert Hodgson had royal permission to trade in the Atlantic, because he was a vassal of the Spanish king, the port officials exclaimed that, although he had sworn loyalty, they could not lose sight of him, “without it being reckless to think with distrust of one who has renounced his domicile and his King, for his interests” (Gómez, 2008, p. 153). A similar consideration was made by Juan Nepomuceno de

9 A.G.S., SGU, Leg. 6947, 8, f. 5r.

Quesada in the conversation held in the colonel's house, previously mentioned, when he tried to warn the viceroy that what Hodgson had done to the British, he would do to the Spaniards in pursuit of his interests.¹⁰

The intentions of the president of Guatemala did not stop with the information sent in different letters to the viceroy of the New Kingdom of Granada. In December of 1787, he sent another spy to Bluefields, named Don Luis Tife, “with the purpose of penetrating the colonel's ideas” in the Mosquito Coast¹¹. The spy was to find out if the colonel's intentions were in favor of the Crown or his interests, so he had to pay attention to the “conduct, negotiations, and deals” he had with the Englishmen and *natives* of the land.

Don Luis Tife, it seems, was a man who was a *baqueano* or an expert of sea life. He was the captain of one of the royal ships that guarded the Mosquito Coast, so he could not only spy on Hodgson's life, but also confront the testimonies that he was giving to the Crown about the possibilities to improve and establish a Spanish colony in Bluefields with colonists from the Canary Islands, Galicia, and Asturias, as the viceroy had proposed from the city of Santafé.

Captain Tife prepared a document with the particular observations he made in Bluefields. Although his arrival was known, he apparently acted very cautiously in his reconnaissance of the port. For example, when he arrived at the port, he found an English merchant frigate at anchor, commanded by a captain named Raw. It is interesting how, drawing on his experience as a sailor, he managed to get to the frigate “on the assumption that he was going fishing”. The captain, with whom he struck up a conversation, had him board the ship. He learned that the frigate was bound for Europe, and that half of the ship's goods belonged to Robert Hodgson. The spy did not hesitate to note in this respect that “it had on board five hundred pieces of *casbano*, and many staves for barrels, one hundred pieces of cedar, a lot of bramble, resin of guapinol stick, that they call copal (of which I bring a sample) all effects of the surroundings of Bluefields”.¹²

The suspicions of the president of Guatemala, then, had good grounds, since the colonel was still engaged in trade with the English, whom he now protected with Spanish documents that granted free passage to the frigates that went in

¹⁰ A.G.S., SGU, Leg., 6947, 8, f. 5r.

¹¹ A.G.S., SGU, Leg., 6948, 17, f. 1r.

¹² A.G.S., SGU, Leg., 6948, 17, f. 9r.

his name, for “being a faithful vassal of the king”. Captain Tife ratified his observations, indicating that, in an interval of about a week, frigates and schooners arrived at Bluefields. In one that arrived on September 23, commanded by Captain Prat, the spy was able to observe that “it came with many letters from the English, addressed to Colonel Hodgson”. The ships that arrived during the time Don Luis Tife stayed came, mainly, from the Cayman Islands and from Jamaica.¹³

Of all the boats that arrived at the harbor guarded by Robert Hodgson, between September 18 and 25, 10 pirogues arrived from the Mosquito Coast. These were Indians who were sent to receive gifts and make exchanges with the colonel. This indicates that, in spite of no longer being the superintendent, he still maintained good relations with the indigenous population, although, in some letters, he told the King that the Indians and the Zambos had turned against him. In Luis Tife’s report it is noted that:

Some and others came to sell the commander or his son carey, bramble, pieces of wood, and copal, in exchange for clothes, liquor, and tools, although I noticed that Bluefields had very few of all these effects, unless he has a warehouse in this place, which I could not find no matter how cautiously I tried.¹⁴

Don Luis Tife recognized the 25 thatched huts that served as housing for the workers who were engaged in cutting wood, caring for banana plantations, and fishing. He also described the port, a testimony in which he noted that during his reconnaissance he tried to go unnoticed as a fisherman:

Assuming I was going to fish (the same thing I did to recognize the frigate) I examined the whole port to my satisfaction, and I found that its mouth is as wide as two gunshots, in it there is a channel that forms two sandbanks // with the width of a gunshot, and the bottom is two fathoms and a quarter, through which ships larger than a canoe must pass, but when they arrive at the anchorage, there are four and a half fathoms of water.¹⁵

The testimonies left by the spies Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada and Captain Don Luis Tife prove that Robert Hodgson never wanted to give up the illicit trade that the frontier offered him. His family had enjoyed strategic privileges in the territory that exceeded the interests of the Spanish and English monarchies. It could

13 A.C.S., SGU, Leg., 6948, 17, f. 9v.

14 A.C.S., SGU, Leg., 6948, 17, f. 9v.

15 A.C.S., SGU, Leg., 6948, 17, f. 10r.-v.

be said that when he sought to change sides, he intended to “die on his terms,” that is, on the Mosquito coast smuggling with Spaniards, Englishmen, Zambian chiefs, etc. Although the royal officials constantly complained that his letters did not offer much usefulness in descriptions and information, besides the fact that he wrote them in English, when he had a “perfect” command of Spanish. All these aspects do not detract from the viceroy’s purpose of taking advantage of his experience in colonization and the establishment of populations in the Mosquito Coast, since, by having Robert Hodgson as an ally, he learned the news about the alliances between the Indians and the English, and he served as a mediator between the Spaniards who sought contact with the Zambo kings of the chiefdoms.

Final Considerations

Until the day of his death, Robert Hodgson was persecuted by Spanish Crown officials, who sought to justify their fears of a man who had betrayed his king and the English people. However, it seems that this did not much affect the merchants of Jamaica and other British colonies who sought, in him, the protection to continue moving with relative ease along the Caribbean Sea.

For the Spaniards who were deprived of jurisdiction over their territories or were removed from the colonization projects being carried out in Central America since the 16th century, Colonel Hodgson represented a threat that they wanted to transmit to the empire by means of news that, although they had some certainties, it was clear that the terms alluding to treason, ambition, and, above all, conspiracy, were largely inventions that tried to differentiate between the established and the marginalized.

Life itineraries, such as the one presented here by Robert Hodgson, reveal a history of political practices that have been neglected by the historiography on the American territories disputed by the European empires. The relationships between the different individuals who moved between Europe and America, or between the Caribbean and the Pacific, demonstrate phenomena of interrelation that go beyond the institutional sphere to make room for a world of representations and circumstances. Here, experience, political strategies, the management of the opinions of certain social groups, and the invention of fears and conspiracies are part of a denser analysis of society.

The production and circulation of information was key to understanding the degree of loyalty of the vassals to the monarch. The insistence on the absence of

letters to the authorities of the *audiencias* and viceroyalties was a clear indication that a person might be distancing himself from his king's dominion. However, this distance was also used to gather new information on enemy neighbors. For this reason, captives, renegades, smugglers, and other wrongdoers were not immediately sentenced to death or banishment, not before inquiring on the benefits they could bring to the expansion of the monarchy.

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