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Ignacio Gallup-Diaz

Bryn Mawr College, igallupd@brynmawr.edu

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A Legacy of Strife: Rebellious Slaves in Sixteenth-Century Panamá

Ignacio Gallup-Díaz
Bryn Mawr College

A group of sixteenth-century chroniclers bestowed the name War of Vallano¹ upon what they interpreted to be a single, specific, self-contained event : a major uprising carried out by rebel slaves -- whom they termed *cimarrones*² – that wracked the isthmus of Panamá in 1555-6. This essay will investigate the contemporary descriptions of the event with the goal of illuminating how an agreed-upon understanding of the rebellion, specifically a triumphalist interpretation that glossed over many of the actions of Vallano himself, became the standard account re-told and embellished by several writers who fashioned chronicles that included descriptions of the uprising.

Several chroniclers writing in the period between 1580 and 1620 embedded a narrative of the War of Vallano in their wide-ranging histories of the Indies. Juan de Castellanos devoted several lines of his massive heroic poem *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias* to it;³ Toribio de Ortiguera described the event in his *Jornada del Rio Marañón*;⁴ Pedro de Aguado devoted several chapters of his *Recopilación Historial* to the

¹The sources render the name as “Vallano,” “Ballano,” “Bayano,” and “Bayamo.” As can be ascertained from my title, I prefer to use “Vallano.”

²Providing a possible etymology of the term *cimarron*, Carlos Federico Guillot, *Negros Rebeldes y Negros Cimarrones*, (Buenos Aires: Fariñas Editores, 1961), p. 38, posits the importance of the word “cima,” a mountain’s highest point. *Cimarrones* would be translated as ‘men of the high mountain.’

³Juan Castellanos, *Primera Parte de las elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, (Madrid, 1589). For a complete modern edition see Miguel Antonio Caro, (ed.), *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, 4 vols., (Bogotá, 1955).

⁴Toribio de Ortiguera, *Jornada del Rio Marañón*, composed between 1581 and 1586, was published in M. Serrano y Sanz, (ed.), *Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, vol. 15, “Historiadores de Indias,” part 2, (Madrid, 1909).

War;⁵ and Garcilaso de la Vega (known as “El Inca”) wrote of Vallano in his *Historia General del Perú*.⁶

My aim is to explore the accounts of the event in order to provide an analysis of it that is more satisfactory than those that have appeared previously. In doing so I will investigate the methods and motivations of the chroniclers who worked to lessen Vallano’s central role in the action as they fit the event within their broader narratives of Spanish conquest. As I intend to prove, the collation of these sources does not allow the researcher to establish the full range of facts as they occurred. My method, rather, is to establish which of the chroniclers came closest to describing the event in a way that approximated Spanish imperial practices.

Antonio de Alsedo, writing in a geographical compendium published in the late 1780s,⁷ provided a helpful thumbnail entry for “Bayano.” As a work of the European Enlightenment, Alsedo’s entries affected an objective, fact-based tone, with the author’s apparent goal being the deployment of his considerable knowledge to confront and dispel the myths and half-truths that had accreted to the peoples and the place-names of the Indies.

“A curvaceous river in the reign of Tierra Firme, in the province of Panamá,” Alsedo began, and, proceeding to more detailed information, continued:

⁵ Pedro de Aguado, *Recopilación Historial*, compiled in the mid-1580s. I consulted the well-edited and introduced Juan Friede, (ed.), Fray Pedro Aguado, *Recopilación Historial*, 4 vols., ([Biblioteca de la Presidencia de Colombia, tomos 31-4], Bogotá, 1956-57).

⁶ Garcilaso “el Inca” de la Vega, *Historia General del Perú, la segunda parte de los comentarios reales*, (1617), tr. H.V. Livermore, 2 vols., (University of Texas Press, 1966).

⁷ Antonio de Alsedo, *Diccionario geográfico histórico de las Indias occidentales o America*, 5 vols., (Madrid: Benito Cano, 1786–1789). For a well-introduced modern edition, see Ciriaco Pérez-Bustamente, (ed.), *Diccionario, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, vols. 205-208, (Madrid, 1967).

It has this name from a black man, a slave and fugitive from his master, to whom there aggregated many others of this class, making themselves feared in those mountains due to the atrocities that they executed upon the Spaniards who fell into their hands. Their actions reached such a level that the Viceroy of Peru, Marquis de Cañete, then passing to his realms in the south, commissioned captain Pedro de Ursúa to destroy and punish those grave enemies. This he accomplished in a long and difficult campaign in 1555, leaving in perpetuity the memory of the accomplishment in the name of the river.⁸

The message is clear: after reading Alsedo's entry, it would hardly seem justified for an educated, late eighteenth-century Spaniard consulting the dictionary to view the event as a war at all.

Alsedo meted out a final telling insult in his discussion of the event, going so far as to inform his readers that the name 'Bayano' graced a Panamánian river not to mark the freed slave's own noteworthy achievements, but rather to enhance the memory of Pedro de Ursúa, the Spanish soldier who had ultimately vanquished him. In sum, Alsedo's entry provides proof that the sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers of the event succeeded in their rhetorical goal. Their writings transformed Vallano from an active historical agent, someone with the ability to instigate and shape events, into a passive figure who, in the end, was judged to have contributed little to the accounts of the rebellion that bears his name.

The chroniclers whom I will discuss preferred to treat the War of Vallano as a single event: Vallano rebelled against the crown, and the representatives of the crown vanquished him and his followers in 1556. Since Vallano was the supreme leader of the insurgents, it follows that his defeat marked the clear end of the insurgency. However,

⁸ Alsedo, *Diccionario*, pp.133-4 of the 1967 edition.

documents produced by Spanish officials in Panamá tell a different story. While Vallano may well have been vanquished in 1556, officials operating in the 1580s – long after the rebel’s death – still wrestled with the problem of uncontrollable rebel slaves.

Rather than decisive battles, a series of treaties brought these rebellions to a more clear-cut conclusion at the close of the century. The treaties recognized a group of leaders of newly-chartered, free black towns. These men, in concert with imperial bureaucrats, practiced a form of contested and erratic colonial collusion. Spanish officials worked to delineate and enforce the duties and norms of behavior that they expected from Afro-Panamanian leaders; the free blacks equally endeavored to define what it meant to be free, black, and the leader of a chartered town in the Spanish empire. At present, our interpretations of how this process evolved have been guided by the points of view of the Spaniards who attempted to control the situation.

The process of Afro-Spanish collusion has been partially hidden from researchers due to the way that local Spanish officials described the *cimarrones*’ pacification to their superiors. In the officials’ descriptions, they conveyed a triumphalist account, confidently portrayed themselves dictating terms to the defeated rebel slaves and forcibly reducing them to a ‘civilized’ state. However, a close reading of the actual agreements, and careful study of the accounts relating the peopling of the free black towns, reveal that both sides contributed to the process in equal measure.⁹

On Spain’s contested imperial frontiers, the process could be replicated with rebellious peoples of African and indigenous descent, comprising a core element of

⁹For a discussion of the process, see my review of C. Jopling’s 1994 compilation of Panamanian documents titled *Indios y negros en Panama en los siglos XVI y XVII XVII: Selecciones de los documentos del Archivo General de Indias*, (Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies; Antigua: Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica, 1994) in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* 83 (2003): 581-3.

Atlantic history, which J.H. Elliott aptly described “as the history ... of the creation, destruction, and recreation of communities as a result of the movement, across the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas.”¹⁰

Historiographical Issues

The historian of the rebel slaves of colonial Panamá confronts several difficulties. The first involves the status of imperial Panamá itself. William Paterson, one of the central figures behind a late-seventeenth century Scottish attempt to colonize eastern Panamá, grandly called the region the “door of the seas and key to the universe.”¹¹ Since it served as a key trade route and transportation hub, Panamá was vitally important to the Spanish empire. The Isthmus needed to be held not for its Indian population, nor for its precious minerals, though it had both in some abundance. Rather, the isthmus of Panamá was a core component of the Spanish empire because it served as the literal door that, when opened, connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In 1513 Vasco Núñez de Balboa, with the assistance of indigenous allies, had discovered the trans-isthmian route connecting the oceans.¹²

Since Spanish ships could not navigate around Cape Horn until the seventeenth century, everything and everyone passing to or from the southern realm of Perú and,

¹⁰J.H. Elliott, “Atlantic History: A Circumnavigation,” the “Afterward” to D. Armitage and M.J. Braddick. (eds.), *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, (Palgrave, 2002), pp. 233-249.

¹¹I treat the Scottish colonization attempt in chapters 4 and 5 of my *Door of the Seas and Key to the Universe: Indian Politics and Imperial Rivalry in the Darién, 1640-1750*, (Columbia University Press, 2001). The text was first published as an electronic monograph (accessible online at <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/>); a print edition appeared under the Columbia University Press imprint in 2005.

¹²The standard account of this portion of Panamá’s history remains Kathleen Romoli, *Balboa of Darién: Discoverer of the Pacific*, (Doubleday, 1953). Also of interest for the period of discovery are C.O. Sauer, *The Early Spanish Main*, (University of California Press, 1966); and Mary Helms, *Ancient Panamá: Chiefs in Search of Power*, (University of Texas Press, 1979).

later, Quito, had to experience, as a portion of the journey, an overland trek across the *camino real* that traversed the Isthmus of Panamá.¹³ Consequently, a sojourn in Panamá became a part of the life-experience of hundreds of Spanish officials, missionaries, and merchants. Consequently, men of political importance -- in addition to missionaries in possession of literary ambitions -- developed strong opinions regarding the region's Indians (truculent and rebellious) and African slaves (rebellious, brutal, difficult to subdue) and were willing to comment, write, and act upon their Panamánian experience.

Panamá occupied a precarious position in the Spanish system. Men and goods needed to pass freely across the isthmus in order for the empire to operate with some level of useful cohesion.¹⁴ However, after the conquest of the Inka state in Peru in 1532, the Spanish population of Panamá diminished as the richer realm siphoned off unattached adventurers. Furthermore, economic and social development in New Spain to the north and Peru to the south soon relegated Panamá to the position of a tertiary economy reliant on shipping and the transportation of goods from other realms across the isthmus.¹⁵

(One of its cities, Nombre de Dios, came to life only when the Spanish fleet was anchored there.) By the latter part of the sixteenth century English and French pirates, recognizing Spanish vulnerability at the isthmian chokepoint, stepped up their disruptive attacks, establishing a durable model for future intruders by coordinating their activities

¹³The *camino real* is well described in Roland Hussey, "Spanish Colonial Trails in Panamá," *Revista de História de América* 6 (1939): 47–74.

¹⁴The lengths taken by Spanish officials to improve the defenses of the isthmus are documented in Christopher Ward, "Imperial Panamá: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America, 1550–1750." (Ph.D. Diss., University of Florida, 1988); and in his monograph *Imperial Panama: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America, 1550-1800*, (University of New Mexico Press, 1993).

¹⁵Panamá's tertiary economy is explored in Antonio Castellero Calvo, *Economía terciaria y sociedad: Panamá siglos XVI y XVII*, (Panamá: Imprensa de la Nación/Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 1980).

with the region's indigenous people and African rebels.¹⁶ Panamá, a core region in the Spanish imperial system, possessed in its meager population and impossible-to-defend borders two decidedly peripheral qualities.

More importantly, the reason we can speak of a historical figure named Vallano at all is the result of a historical accident, an oddity in the generation of a set of historical sources. The chroniclers who described the initial slave uprisings of Panamá, and grouped these events into a single War of Vallano, did so for a very specific reason. For them, the War was a brief episode in the eventful life-story of Don Pedro de Ursúa, the shrewd, Odyssean conquistador who vanquished Vallano. For, after dealing with the fugitive slaves of Panamá, Ursúa was enjoined by the viceroy to embark upon his infamous expedition to explore the Amazon River. That journey produced the spectacular mutiny of Lope de Aguirre, who had Ursúa murdered after wresting the leadership of the expedition from him. These events were shocking to Spanish sensibilities, and they were the subject of considerable commentary.¹⁷

Consequently, the chroniclers who deal with Ursúa's activities in the Isthmus of Panamá bracket the War of Vallano as an early, minor incident in the conquistador's eventful life. Although his interactions with the rebel slaves are worthy of mention, the focal point of Ursúa's life is deemed to be the momentous Amazonian events that took place in his life after he departed from Panamá. The War of Vallano is clearly the introductory matter that prepares the reader for the discussion of the more important later

¹⁶For a recent study of sixteenth-century pirate activity that makes use of English, French, Dutch, and Spanish sources, see Harry Kelsey, *Sir Francis Drake: The Queen's Pirate*, (Yale UP, 1998), esp. pp. 40-68; 240-280; and 367-392.

¹⁷Emiliano Jos, *Jornada de Ursúa a el Dorado*, (Huesca, [Spain], 1927) provides a bibliographic guide to the accounts of the fateful expedition.

occurrences. In this essay it is my intention to work against these ‘centripetal forces’ acting to pull the narrative and the interpretations of events down familiar, problematic paths.

The African rebel slaves whom the Spanish termed *cimarrones* occupy an ambiguous place in the historiography of colonial Panamá. Due to their stout opposition to Spanish imperial designs, they, and Vallano as their most effective leader, have made their way into the books used to teach history to children in Panamá.¹⁸ An African American community in present-day Panamá considers itself descended from the *cimarrones*, and the group’s language, rituals, and dances have been the object of tourism and scholarly study for quite some time.¹⁹ However, the rebels’ color and their continent of origin have been coupled with the assumption that their actions against the Spanish were simply the result of the Africans following their rebellious “natures,” a conclusion which has led many commentators to heap both subtle and outright scorn upon them.²⁰

The rebellious bands of sixteenth-century Africans at war with the Spanish could be accommodated to a textbook narrative that frames the colonial period as a precursor to

¹⁸The *cimarrones* are given a central place in the colonial portion of Juan B. Sosa and Enrique J. Arce’s seminal *Compendio de Historia de Panamá*, (Panamá, 1911); for the place this text holds in the Panamanian educational curriculum, see Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro’s introduction to *Compendio de historia de Panamá: Edición facsímil de la de 1911*, (Panamá, 1977).

¹⁹For an informative study of the Afro-Panamánian successor community, see John M. Lipski, “The Negros Congos of Panamá: Afro-Hispanic Creole Language and Culture,” *Journal of Black Studies* 16 (1986): 409-428; P. Drolet, “The Congo Ritual of Northeastern Panamá: An Afro-American Expressive Structure of Cultural Adaptation,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Illinois, 1980); Ronald R. Smith, “The Society of Los Congos of Panamá: Afro-American dance theatre,” in Adrienne Lanier Seward, (ed.), *The Role of Afro-American Folklore in the Teaching of the Arts and the Humanities*, (Indiana UP, 1979), pp. 118-164; and Victor M. Franceschi, “Folklore nacional: los negros congos en Panamá,” *Lotería* 5:51 (Feb. 1960): 90-107.

²⁰Armando Fortune is the lone exception to this pervasive problem in the historiography. See his thought-provoking essays: “Bayano, precursor de la libertad de los esclavos.” *Lotería* 234 (Aug. 1975): 1–15; and “Los negros cimarrones en Tierra Firme y su lucha por la libertad.” *Lotería* 171 (Feb. 1970): 17–43; 172 (Mar. 1970): 32–53; 173 (Apr. 1970): 16–40; and 174 (May 1970): 46–65.

Panamanian nationhood. However, the *cimarrones*' acts of war have primarily been interpreted as atavistic, barbaric and pointlessly blood-thirsty rampages. A narrative that depicts the attainment of national identity as a supreme achievement ultimately has little space for hapless, accidental historical actors of African descent who were, it seemed, more interested in theft than they were in contributing to Panamanian national identity.

Problematically, the rebellions of the *cimarrones* have been depicted as doomed to fail: after all, the slaves' pursuit of the atavistic goal of a return to Africa and the resumption of what some researchers deemed a more natural, simple, animistic or African way of life was, by definition, unattainable. In sum, previous depictions of the uprisings and the Africans who took part in them have been marred by disdain for the rebels,²¹ an uncritical acceptance of the Spanish descriptions of their actions and motivations,²² or pseudo-sociological interpretations of their favorable adaptation to the humid rain-forest environment due to their natural predisposition to it.²³

Writing soon after the end of the Second World War, John E. Minter encapsulated the racialism that has marred some of the modern interpretations of the rebellion.²⁴ Minter's twelfth chapter, titled "Black Magic," begins by describing the condition of Panamá's Africans as "a never-ending trudge along the Camino del Oro ..." This is an unobjectionable start, though the paragraph's conclusion soon reveals the author's problematic assumptions: "[there] appeared increasing numbers of black savages [sic]

²¹Carlos Restrepo Canal, "Leyes de Manumisión," in Eduardo Posada, *La esclavitud en Colombia*, (Bogotá, 1933).

²²This trait mars Guillot's novelistic and informative *Negros Rebeldes*; Fernando Romero, "Los negros Panameños en el siglo XVI," *Boletín de la Academia Panameña de Historia* 2d series, no. 1, 1943, pp. 1-34; and Luis A. Diez Castillo, *Los cimarrones y los negros antillanos en Panamá*, 2d ed., (Panamá, 1981).

²³This is most prevalent in Guillot, *Negros Rebeldes*; while sympathetic to the *cimarrones*, he errs in this regard.

²⁴J.E Minter, *The Chagres: River of the Westward Passage*, (Rinehart, 1948).

from Africa, their naked bodies scored with the welts and tattoos of the Congo country, their brilliant white teeth filed to shark-like points as the unfailing badge of cannibalism.”²⁵

Attitudes similar to Minter’s can be found throughout the historiography and some modern historians and anthropologists have done little better at interpreting and explaining the motivations of the rebellious Panamanian slaves, arguing that their combative actions against the Spanish were the result of the group’s near-biological desire to revert to their ‘former state’. The prevailing assumption is that since the *cimarrones* were Africans transported against their will to the Americas, they ‘naturally’, reverted to purely African modes of thought and being upon attaining their freedom. It is indisputable that the *cimarrones*, upon freeing themselves from slavery, created communities whose cultural, religious, and political practices were deeply influenced by their inhabitants’ African culture. However, the process through which these communities and practices were created was a historical one that did not take place in a vacuum. The cultural, linguistic, and religious factors that shaped these communities were more varied and complex than previous scholars of Panamá have been willing to allow. In a profound and fundamental sense, the *cimarrones* were both African and American.²⁶

²⁵Minter, *Chagres*, p. 109. In an endnote explaining his choice of terms, Minter divulged some revealing information when he stated “[f]or want of a better word, I have violated my Southern raising by the indiscriminate use ... of the word ‘Yankee’ to distinguish United States citizens” (p. 392)

²⁶For a nuanced discussion of the interaction of culture, language, history, and geography in the creation of a distinctly African-American culture, see Richard Price and Sidney Mintz, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, (Beacon, 1992). R. Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, 2d ed., (Johns Hopkins, 1996) provides a ground-breaking collection of articles with a broad geographical range. Of equal

I argue that the *cimarrones* were not endeavoring to achieve a real or figurative return to Africa. Neither were they trying to fashion a replica of Africa in the Americas. Having fought for and attained their freedom, they resisted those who attempted to re-enslave them; they attacked the economic interests of the Spanish empire; and they assisted the enemies of that empire. Even while hunted by their enemies, the *cimarrones* established complex communities that integrated military and political leadership, religious practitioners, and liberated families. The Spanish termed these communities *palenques*.²⁷ Moreover, after the fighting ended, leaders of several of the rebel bands accepted Spanish offers that their people incorporate specific towns and transform themselves into loyal subjects of the Spanish crown. In doing so they created a series of free black settlements, sites of political, cultural, and linguistic admixture.²⁸

The Chroniclers: Framing a Narrative

Beatriz Pastor has described two strands of historical writing emerging from the Americas following the conquest.²⁹ The first was a triumphalist one that highlighted the heroic actions of the outnumbered Spanish conquistadors as they faced the armies of well-organized indigenous powers.³⁰ The second strand Pastor terms the narratives of failure. These were not tales describing straightforward, pre-ordained victories over

importance are Price's two monographs: *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*, (Johns Hopkins UP, 1983); and *Alabi's World*, (Johns Hopkins UP, 1990).

²⁷The term '*palenque*' is discussed by José Franco, "Maroons and Slave Rebellions in the Spanish Territories," in Price, (ed.), *Maroon Societies*, pp. 35-49.

²⁸Maria del Carmen Mena García, *La sociedad de Panamá en el siglo XVI*, (Sevilla, 1984), chapter V, "Reducción de los negros cimarrones: Santa Cruz la Real y Santiago del Príncipe," pp. 422-426 provides a useful corrective treatment.

²⁹Pastor, *The Armature of Conquest: Spanish Accounts of the Discovery of America*, (Stanford UP, 1992), pp. 105-129.

³⁰Pastor places portions of Columbus's and Cortez's letters in this group, along with Bernal Díaz's *History of New Spain*.

American non-believers. Instead, they described utterly lost Spanish explorers overcoming difficult situations by dint of equal parts luck and their wits.³¹

Most of the chroniclers described Ursúa's early exploits in Panamá in triumphalist terms, a strategy that allowed them to present a dramatic and sharp contrast to their depictions of the fateful Amazonian expedition which followed -- an event that could only properly be framed as a narrative of failure. The ease with which Vallano was vanquished is contrasted with the arduousness of the Amazonian expedition.

One chronicler's account of the War of Vallano dissented from the triumphalist tone adopted by the other writers. Garcilaso's description of the rebellion injected a note of realism into the collection of narratives that described the War of Vallano. My claim that Garcilaso's account represents a departure in the framing of the confrontation between Vallano and Ursúa does not include an argument that Garcilaso's text be accepted as an unmediated source. My contention is that Garcilaso's description, in incorporating several elements that reflected the actual process at work as the Spanish attempted to pacify their imperial frontiers, provided a discussion closer to what actually transpired on the ground than any other chronicler.

Castellanos

The poet Juan de Castellanos provided a terse account of the rebellion, and was the most blunt in his triumphalist tone.³² What follows is his succinct description of Ursúa's heroic actions in Panamá:

³¹Pastor categorizes Cabeza de Vaca's narrative as a member of this group, as well as the accounts of the mutiny of Lope de Aguirre during the Amazonian expedition. However, she also sees Cortez's fifth letter as transitional, and finds the beginnings of the rhetoric of travail and failure in Columbus' first letter.

*[Ursúa] residió con ciertas compañías
En el Nombre de Dios algunos días*

*Donde recogió copia de soldados
Para los ejercicios de la guerra,
Y allí desbarató negros alzados
Que estaban hechos fuertes en la sierra;
Los cuales, por ser muchos y esforzados,
Ponían en temor toda la tierra,
Priendoles á su rey dicho Ballano,
Aunque tenia poderosa mano.³³*

*(Ursúa resided with certain people/
for several days in Nombre de Dios/*

*Where he gathered a company of soldiers/
In order to take part in battle/
And there he set to flight the rebel blacks/
Who had made themselves strong in the mountains;/
They, being powerful and strong/
Had terrified all of the land,/*
He imprisoned their king Ballano,/
Even though he had a powerful hand.)

In Castellanos' account, Vallano is afforded a "powerful hand." However, it's clear that the poet deployed this phrase not to praise Vallano, but rather as a means to validate Ursúa's own achievement. Africans can certainly wield strength, as Vallano did, but no matter how powerful they might become, they cannot confront a Spanish warrior at the head of an organized military force. This account is best described as a mention; it is the next chronicler who begins the process of shaping a narrative.

³²Juan Castellanos, *Primera Parte de las elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, (Madrid, 1589). For a complete modern edition see Miguel Antonio Caro, (ed.), *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, 4 vols., (Bogotá, 1955).

³³Caro, (ed.), Castellanos, *Elegías*, vol. 1, pp. 611-612.

Ortiguera

In his first chapter, the chronicler Toribio de Ortiguera described Ursúa's Panamá-based activities.³⁴ Ortiguera's account, the paradigmatic version of the rebellion, described in strong, direct language how viceroy Cañete

sent Ursúa to Nombre de Dios in Tierra Firme, where a squadron of black cimarrones operated. These cimarrones were nothing more than bandits who inflicted great harm on the cities of Nombre de Dios and Panamá. They freed blacks from the service of their Spanish masters, taking them to the mountains in which they lived They took goods from the travelers on the road that connected the two cities, making it impossible to live or do anything in those territories. The cimarrones had an army numbering more than 1,200 men and women; among this number were a king and a bishop. Through great industry captain Ursúa in short order conquered, killed, and threw to the dogs a great quantity of these bad people. He imprisoned their king, named Vallano, and sent him as prisoner to the King. He exacted a great and public justice upon the rebels, sending them in chains to Nombre de Dios and Panamá, where they were thrown to the dogs and torn apart while still alive so that the slaves there could see this and know that the same fate awaited them if they left the service of their masters. This was very necessary since in that land there are no other servants but the slaves. ... Due to the actions of Pedro de Ursúa many of those escaped slaves returned to service in Nombre de Dios and Panamá, and people could travel the road unperturbed and in tranquility—no one was obstructed, robbed or assaulted, things returned to the way they were in the past.³⁵

Ortiguera united all of the necessary elements in his description: a great threat emerged; the enemy amassed in large numbers and possessing the ability to increase those numbers through the liberation of their enslaved brethren; and Pedro de Ursúa entered the fray and got the job done. The final sentence of Ortiguera's account is the most telling: with the rebellion crushed, things returned to their former state.

³⁴Toribio de Ortiguera, *Jornada del Rio Marañón*, composed between 1581 and 1586, was published in M. Serrano y Sanz, (ed.), *Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, vol. 15, "Historiadores de Indias," part 2, (Madrid, 1909).

³⁵Ortiguera, *Jornada*, pp. 307-8.

Ortiguera made no attempt to paper over the brutality involved in the restoration of order in Panamá. He described rebel bands that included men, women, and, it is presumed, children, all of whom were subject to the same ghastly treatment when Spanish exemplary justice was meted out. However, a slight note of defensiveness entered the account as Ortiguera justified the killing of the captured rebels by having dogs tear them apart while they still lived. “This was very necessary,” he remarked, arguing that circumstances unique to Panamá made this the only possible course of action.

Following up on this argument, Ortiguera offered a balm to any of his readers who might have tender consciences regarding the rebels’ rough treatment. The brutality visited upon the captives was necessary in the larger scheme of things, since it restored to the Spaniards the ability to carry out their appointed work in the Americas. Such a concentrated exercise of brutality clearly required the author’s explanation, but it was inarguably justified since it erased chaos and disorder and left the free movement of goods and people in its wake.

Castellanos focused exclusively upon Ursúa’s heroism, while mentioning the bravery of Ursúa’s opponent, Vallano. Ortiguera, on the other hand, produced an actual narrative of the War. In his account, the rebellion of the *cimarrones* was provided a definable beginning, middle, and end. In addition, the writer articulated an ideological justification for the endeavor and the methods used. Finally, the action of the narrative, although set into chaotic motion by the African slaves, was sure-handedly managed and brought to a permanent conclusion through the decisive actions of a Spaniard.

Aguado

The most extensive description of the War of Vallano is contained in a chronicle compiled by Pedro de Aguado.³⁶ The account of Ursúa's expedition against the *cimarrones* occupies four chapters of the text. Aguado's version of the story is unique not only due to its length. Although the elements that underpinned Ortiguera's concise core account were present, details are added, characters are fleshed out, and ideological points are made in a more explicit fashion. In fact, this text provided the most detailed prosecutorial and ideological case against the *cimarrones*, presenting extensive evidence of their grave crimes. Not only have the *cimarrones* transgressed against their lawful masters by fleeing, they added to their problems by committing wanton acts of despoliation and robbery against the Crown and its representatives. Most importantly, under the tutelage of a man called 'the bishop,' the rebels reverted to idolatry. They had even taken up new ritual practices that were nothing more than crude mockeries of Catholic rituals. This was a very grave charge, since, it was argued, the slaves were Christians who had been baptized by their owners. Their mass reversion to idolatry made them not only rebels against the state but religious apostates as well.

To substantiate this claim, the text included descriptions of the *cimarrones'* religious practices. Summing up his revulsion, the author stated "their bishop imitates

³⁶Pedro de Aguado, *Recopilación Historial*, compiled in the mid-1580s. I consulted the well-edited and introduced Juan Friede, (ed.), *Fray Pedro Aguado, Recopilación Historial*, 4 vols., ([Biblioteca de la Presidencia de Colombia, tomos 31-4], Bogotá, 1956-57). The *Recopilación* represents material written by at least three different hands, with the Ursúa material standing aside as distinct from the others. For information on Aguado and the censorship of the manuscript, see Orlando Fals-Borda, "Odyssey of a Sixteenth-Century Document: Fray Pedro de Aguado's 'Recopilación Historial'," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 35 (1955): 203-220; and Juan Friede, "Fray Pedro Aguado, con Occasion del 450 Aniversario de su Nacimiento," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 44(1964): 382-389.

the celebration of the mass.”³⁷ Other sacraments were also simulated, and, the author implied, debased and mocked. Several researchers interested in the life-experiences of the Afro-Panamanians have uncritically read this description as a factual eyewitness account of what the *cimarrones* did when they worshipped.³⁸ However, my contention is that the description is a reflection of what the Spanish imperialists believed -- and wished for others to believe -- about the derivative and deformed nature of the rebels’ religious practices. The description of the African bishop’s sacramental practices is of clear interest to the historian nonetheless. Although its ethnohistorical value is limited, the text serves as a marker of the broader frameworks and typologies available to the chroniclers as they condemned the rebels in print.³⁹

In addition to apostasy, the author added usurpation of authority and miscegenation to the charges against the rebels, claiming that they had

*fortified themselves in a town of Indians named Caricua, whose villagers they have placed under their own subjection with rigorous violence, taking their women and daughters and mixing and involving themselves with them ... producing a different kind of people ... called zambahigos, as they are people who don’t merit the use of the honorable name mulatto.*⁴⁰

In this account the confrontation with the region’s rebellious ex-slaves is framed as a humanitarian act in favor of the region’s hard-pressed indigenous peoples, and an assertion of a brand of tempered racial purity. While the racial mixtures overseen by the Spanish are afforded an ‘honorable name,’ those taking place under the auspices of the rebels generate ‘a different kind of people.’

³⁷Aguado, *Recopilación*, ed. Friede, v. 4, p. 112.

³⁸See, for example, Guillot, *Negros Rebeldes*, pp. 52-57.

³⁹J. Cañizares-Esguerra treats the question of the typologies that Europeans used to order and describe their experiences in the New World in his *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic*, (Stanford UP, 2006), passim.

⁴⁰Aguado, *Recopilación*, ed. Friede, v. 4, p. 115.

In the end, it is clear that the chronicler believed that the major crime Vallano had committed was that of pride. The ex-slave held an inflated opinion of himself – one so elevated that it outstripped the reality of the situation. The writer deemed the slave’s usurpation of honor and authority intolerable, and knew that his readers would as well. He described how Vallano imperiously “constrained and forced the governor of Panamá and Nombre de Dios, to treat and negotiate with him on several occasions, as if the lands he ranged upon were his by descent and the Spanish had but usurped them from him.”⁴¹ Aguado had Ursúa reiterate this charge in a speech made to his men moments before the capture of Vallano.

The conquistador planned to take Vallano prisoner at a meal convened to celebrate a negotiated peace agreed to by the opposing forces. This would, of course, occur while the men met under a sign of truce. Feeling the need to explain his motivations Aguado has Ursúa make the following speech:

*Since these are fugitive and traitorous slaves, purchased and kept with our own money, we have license to use whatever craft necessary in order to capture and remit them to the servitude of those who once owned them ... This band of low-born blacks, acting against all laws divine and human, pretend not only to make themselves lords of this land, where they were neither they nor any of their kin were born nor raised ... and constitute amongst themselves a King and Lord.*⁴²

In Aguado’s rendition, Ursúa’s expedition followed close upon the heels of several others that had returned to Nombre de Dios after having failed to pacify the rebels. The *cimarrones* ranged through the mountains and countryside with such ease that the Spanish forces simply could not keep up with them. Ursúa’s expedition was different: he was able to coordinate his forces, resupply them by boat, factors presented

⁴¹Aguado, *Recopilación*, ed. Friede, v. 4, p. 116.

⁴²Aguado, *Recopilación*, ed. Friede, v. 4, pp. 125-6.

as decisive to his success. In addition, the author highlights another element crucial to the conquistador: Ursúa understood that Vallano, though powerful, was not a man worthy of honorable treatment. This insight enabled Ursúa to succeed where the others had failed. Tactics that could not be deployed against an honorable foe could be used to their full effect to subdue Vallano and his people.

The chronicler wished the reader to understand that in order to succeed against a barbarous foe, barbaric methods were not just condoned, but had to be actively encouraged. A planned battle disrupted Ursúa's "feast." The Spanish forces struck down or captured the bulk of Vallano's forces. Having broken his foe's army, Ursúa's first impulse was to take to the field and wipe out the straggling remnants of the rebel band. However, the conquistador realized that due to the Africans' intimate knowledge of the countryside -- this would be a difficult proposition. Continued military operations would exhaust his men, consume his supplies, and dissipate his wealth. Ursúa therefore offered Vallano, now a prisoner, a deal: the remaining *cimarrones* would be pardoned, granted a place to settle, and would be left in peace. In return, they would be required to find and return any slave that escaped from his owner in Nombre de Dios or Panamá City within three days time. In Aguado's account, this proved to be an offer the rebels could not refuse. In closing, Vallano and several African captains were kept as hostages to ensure the peace.⁴³

⁴³Aguado, *Recopilación*, ed. Friede, v. 4, pp. 127-132.

Garcilaso

Writing a decade later, Garcilaso “el Inca” de la Vega provided a notable variant to the more ideologically driven descriptions of his chronicle-writing peers.⁴⁴ His narrative came closest to describing the actual manner in which real world imperial officials dealt with intractable problems at the edges of the empire. If one wanted to encapsulate the kind of imperial strategy that Spanish officials actually pursued on their frontiers – one that adapted to local conditions and strategic realities – Garcilaso’s description could serve. Spanish forces did not smite down the forces of chaos and apostasy with a single blow. “El Inca” depicted the negotiated compromises that officials necessarily made when they could not exterminate their foes on the battlefield.

In Garcilaso’s account, the rebels could not be destroyed in battle. Negotiation and co-optation were the alternatives the Spaniards necessarily deployed to contain the damage. It is true that the deal was reached after the rebels “found themselves in a corner,” but Garcilaso left the nature of this space undefined. He provided no descriptions of clever Odyssean tricks, and the encomiums to Ursúa’s military prowess were muted. In contradistinction to Aguado’s account, the settlement that ends the war is not a selfless gift that Ursúa offered to his defeated foe.

Rather, Garcilaso described events as follows:

Pedro de Ursúa [was] a noble gentleman, a fine soldier, and a captain who had made great conquests in New Spain ... [A]s the Reverend Juan de Castellanos writes, he went to live at Nombre de Dios, where Don Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza found him and commissioned him to find and apply a solution for the havoc wrought by the fugitive Negroes called

⁴⁴Garcilaso “el Inca” de la Vega, *Historia General del Perú, la segunda parte de los comentarios reales*, (1617), tr. H.V. Livermore, 2 vols., (University of Texas Press, 1966). This text was drafted in the early seventeenth century, and was published after the author’s death. Part Two, Book Eight, Chapter Three is titled “The Election of the Marquis of Cañete as Viceroy of Peru; his arrival at Tierra Firme; the fugitive Negroes are recaptured ...,” p. 1421.

cimarrones, who live in the mountains and come down to the roads to attack merchants and travelers, stealing their goods and killing many of them. This had become so intolerable that it was impossible to travel unless in parties of twenty or more. And the number of Negroes was increasing daily, for having such an asylum it was easy for them to run away without the slightest danger from their owners.

In order to clarify what Castellanos says (he mentions nothing of this), we must explain that Pedro de Ursúa raised a force to conquer the cimarrones—a word from the language of the natives of the Windward Islands—enlisting many of Francisco Hernández Giron’s men who had either fled or been exiled to those parts, and the viceroy pardoned all who took part in the expedition. When the Negroes found themselves in a corner, they asked for terms. To restore peace, which was very necessary, all those who had hitherto fled from their masters were given their freedom, since their masters had lost them in any case. In return the cimarrones were obliged to hand over any who fled in the future or to pay what their masters asked for them; any Negro who was maltreated by his or her master could be freed by paying his master what he had cost him, and the Negroes were to establish themselves in places where they could live as settlers and residents, and not remain scattered in the wilderness. They could trade with the Spaniards as they wished. All this was agreed by both sides, so that they could live in peace. The Negroes gave sufficient hostages and thus guaranteed the treaty. Their king, called Ballano, came in person to deliver the hostages, but he himself remained as a permanent hostage, for they refused to release him. The poor Negro was taken to Spain, where he died.⁴⁵

Garcilaso’s account in outline generally agreed with Aguado and Ortiguera, and became source material for the composite, standard version of the events – the one encapsulated by Alsedo’s dictionary entry. However, the details of Garcilaso’s narrative set it apart from the others as a distinctive minority view. Vallano came under Ursúa’s power through a final ruse, after the two had agreed to a peace. The African was not described as having failed on the battlefield. The writer also evinced sympathy for Vallano’s plight, referring to him pointedly as “the poor Negro.”

⁴⁵Garcilaso, *Historia General*, tr. Livermore, pp. 1421-1422.

Finally, alone amongst the chroniclers, Garcilaso described the provisions of the peace treaty that ended the war in some detail, and made clear that many of the provisions demanded by the *cimarrones* rather unselfishly dealt with the treatment of those Africans who remained in slavery. In reading and pondering Garcilaso's account of the War, one might deduce that the rebel's cause was actually a just one. In carefully studying Garcilaso's treatment of the War of Vallano, evidence is found for David Brading's contention that "[t]he Royal Commentaries of the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega should be interpreted as a carefully mediated, sustained rebuttal of the imperial tradition of conquest history" ⁴⁶ In addition, *cimarron*-Spanish interactions in the 1570s provide evidence that el Inca's account accurately reflected the manner through which imperial officials "subdued" Panamá's rebellious Africans. ⁴⁷

The War after the 'End' of the War

The reports made by imperial officials, missionaries, and visitors to the isthmus of Panamá in the generation following the 'conclusion' of the War of Vallano provide

⁴⁶David Brading, "The Incas and the Renaissance: The Royal Commentaries of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18 (1986): 1-23. This argument is incorporated into his *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State 1492-1867*, (Cambridge UP, 1991), see esp. pp. 255-273. For sensitive explorations of Garcilaso's narratological methods and motivations, see also Patricia Heid, "Una lección sobre como no conquistar: 'exempla' irónicos en los Comentarios reales de los Incas," *Revista de Critica Literaria Latinoamericana* 25 [49] (1999): 11-26; and José Antonio Mazzotti, "Mestizo Dreams: Transculturation and Heterogeneity in Inca Garcilaso de la Vega," in R. Blair St. George, (ed.), *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, (Cornell UP, 2000), pp. 131-147

⁴⁷Francis Drake, operating in the region in the 1570s, coordinated his activities with a band of free blacks. See Kelsey, *Francis Drake*, pp. 40-68; and the Spanish documents transcribed in Irene Wright's *Documents Concerning English Voyages to the Spanish Main 1569-1580*, (London: Hakluyt Society, [Second Series, 71], 1932). I am preparing an article for publication titled "Drake's Allies in Panama: Symerons/Cimarrones" that examines Drake's expeditions of the 1570s.

confirmation of Garcilaso's account. Consistent complaints of a continuing *cimarron* problems appear in these writings.⁴⁸ Although the triumphalist chroniclers clearly described Pedro de Ursúa as having restored a lasting peace to the region, later visitors found the region still quite 'infested' with marauding *cimarrones*. Rather than a one-time event with a single solution, marronage in Panamá had not been vanquished in 1556 with the defeat of Vallano. Philip II's own cosmographer would report, in a geographical survey of the Indies produced at the instigation of the monarch, that "many black *cimarrones* live in [Panamá]; in the year 1574 it is said that they number 3,000 and more, and that they freely live and operate there without any means available to overpower them due to the conditions of the land."⁴⁹

Spanish officials' deployment of negotiation as a means to achieve the pacification and concentration of several bands of rebel Africans into Christian towns would serve as a model for officials on the empire's frontiers. Since experience had shown that a single, climatic battle would not decide the issue, a long-term, gradualist policy was pursued. My conclusion is that on the imperial frontiers Spanish officials were following a 'Garcilasan' solution, while working to frame and describe their actions in as 'triumphalist' a vein as rhetoric might allow.⁵⁰ The Panamá section of the Archivo General de Indias contains numerous folders containing documents produced by colonial

⁴⁸For a selection of material relevant to the *cimarrones* in the 1580-1600 period; see Carol F. Jopling, (ed.), *Indios y Negros en Panamá en los Siglos XVI y XVII: Selecciones de los documentos del Archivo General de Indias*, (Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies; Antigua: Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica, 1994).

⁴⁹Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias*, Marcos Jiménez de la Espada and Maria del Carmen González Muñoz, (eds.), (Madrid, 1971 [Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 248]), p. 174.

⁵⁰I discuss this form of necessary colonial double-speak in my *Door of the Seas*, esp. chs. 2-6.

officials reporting to the Crown the results of their continuing negotiated settlements with *cimarron* leaders.⁵¹

During a period of particularly heavy foreign intrusion after 1570, officials in Panamá City negotiated peace agreements with the self-proclaimed leaders of several of the *cimarron* communities in Panamá. As a result of these treaties, the pacified rebels were bound by oath to cease hostile operations against the Spanish and to reduce themselves to live in a civil, Christian fashion in newly chartered towns. The leaders who accepted these terms were commissioned as the heads of the new towns, and granted colonial offices and salaries. In return, the towns were expected to muster reliable militia forces that could bolster the region's defenses against foreign intruders. Although some of the African leaders accepted the new colonial offices, seeing them as something beneficial to both themselves and their people, others opposed the new system and remained active rebels. Still others accepted, only to reject their positions and return, with their people, to their prior status.

Through this process, a self-selected portion of the *cimarron* movement accepted incorporation into the Spanish empire. By the same token, local Spanish officials accepted that their realms were multi-racial and diverse. Of course, they hoped to change this, since their belief was that, upon becoming urbanized and Christianized, the pacified Africans who signed the treaties had literally changed their identities. Upon accepting "reduction" and "pacification," they ceased to be slaves and *cimarrones*. Conversely, local officials no longer referred to them as Africans.

⁵¹Jopling, *Indios y Negros*, pp. 347-428, transcribes nearly seventy documents relating to the pacification and resettlement of several *cimarron* bands between 1575 and 1600; see also Enriqueta Vila Vilar, "Cimarronaje en Panama y Cartagena: el costo de una guerilla en el siglo XVII," *Caravelle* 49 (1987): 77-92.

Those *cimarron* leaders who transformed themselves from African rebels into *alcaldes* and *cabildo* members also worked to convince the Spanish that their people had become Christianized subjects of the Crown. The nature of these continuing Spanish-Afro-Panamánian relationships, and the changing perceptions and identities underpinning them, are questions of great historical interest.