

JESUITS AND CORAS IN COLONIAL NAYARIT: NEGOTIATING EVANGELIZATION

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Abstract: The conquest and evangelization of the Coras of the Sierra del Nayar in western New Spain in the eighteenth century was uneven at best. Subsequent Cora religious traditions have been labeled “syncretic,” apparently rooted in autochthonous and Catholic traditions. This paper argues that their unique Christianity was forged in the colonial period as a negotiated response to Jesuit evangelization, and that this process was characterized by multiple meanings and political realities.

Each year during Holy Week (*Semana Santa*) hundreds of anthropologists and other tourists make the trip to a remote region of Mexico’s Sierra Madre Occidental, in the northeast corner of the state of Nayarit, to witness an extraordinary celebration among the indigenous Cora people there. The Cora centers of Jesus María and La Mesa del Nayar suddenly become teeming with gawking outsiders, to the delight of the mestizo shopkeepers, who have plenty of beer and sundries on hand to satisfy the crowd. The minions arrive a score at a time on flights from lowland Nayarit, toting cameras and notebooks. They come to witness the unusual (or, in the words of the National Geographic, the “strange”) spring ritual in the days leading to Easter.

While each Cora community celebrates *semana santa* in its own fashion, the similarities between the local interpretations are strikingly different from much of Christendom. While the mestizo priest of the town conducts Catholic rituals such as a drama of the visitation of the stations of the Cross, the towns are taken over by wildly running Coras, who have decorated themselves with soot and paint for the occasion. These *judios* (literally, Jews) or *borrados* (“erased ones”) assume control of the municipal and church buildings as they dance and scurry, often comically and with no shortage of sexual imagery, among onlookers (including, of course, the tourists). This goes on for several days until an effigy of Christ, or a child representing him, is ritually crucified, and control of the town is returned to the properly selected elders. By Sunday, chaos has given way to order. Most of the interpretations of this ritual stress the connection with the agricultural cycle, hence the fecundity of the reproductive and animal images in the dances, yet everything is mixed with elements of Christianity.¹

¹ See Jesus Jáuregui, Johannes Neurath and Arturo Gutiérrez, eds., *La Semana Santa en el Gran Nayar*, (Mexico City: Centro Francés de Estudios Mexicanos y Centroamericanos – INI, 1997); for a popularized view of the ritual see Aldana E., Guillermo. “Mesa del Nayar's Strange Holy Week.” *National Geographic Magazine* 139 (1971): 780-795.

Today in the church of the Cora village of La Mesa one can find another example of the contemporary mixing of Catholic and indigenous traditions. On a makeshift altar in a back room lies an interesting artifact of Cora religiosity that is claimed to date from the colonial period. After the Spanish military victory at La Mesa in 1722, several altars were discovered near La Mesa. These were dismantled under the supervision of one of the Jesuit fathers who accompanied the soldiers, Father Antonio Arias. In a cave was found a group of seated skeletons, including that of the sixteenth-century Cora leader, Nayarit or El Rey Nayar (this according to Cora informants). The skeletons, "idols," and other Cora ceremonial materials were taken all the way to Mexico City and burned in a magnificent *auto de fe*.² Having judged these idols and the related icons to be central to the idolatrous pre-contact religious tradition of the Devil, the Spaniards spared no expense to make their displeasure known about this belief system.

According to the Coras in La Mesa today, however, the skull of el Rey Nayar, "the son of the sun," was rescued from the Spaniards, and remained hidden for many years.³ At the moment, the skull is housed in an altar in the back of the church at La Mesa. (See illustration in appendix.) It is uncertain from available documentation just when Coras returned to honoring this skull of their ancestor, since the first notation of this since the colonial period was made in 1997 by Adriana Guzmán, who conducted field work in La Mesa. A legitimate guess is that the practice began during the nineteenth century, after the Spanish authorities and the Franciscan missionaries had left the scene. What appears certain is that today the Coras celebrate the *Día de los Muertos* in honor of el Rey Nayar, and that during this ceremony the skull is placed on a wooden altar constructed in the center of the church's entrance.⁴ Pilgrims arrive throughout the evening with floral and cotton offerings for el Rey, asking for good harvests, rains and health. These prayers are offered through El Rey Nayar to the god of the sun. The timing of the celebration of *Día de Muertos* at the beginning of November is such that the rainy season is coming to a halt in the Sierra; Guzmán concludes that this ceremony is therefore one moment in the annual ritual cycle which focuses on the rains and return of the harvest.

The unusual celebrations described here suggest a complicated drama is unfolding on multiple levels. The readings and purposes of the observers would constitute a fine subject of inquiry, as would the influence of these outsiders on the re-creation of Cora ritual practice. What are the Cora beliefs that encourage these celebrations to occur each year, and how are these rituals influenced by shifting perceptions of the non-Cora world? These are fascinating questions that have perplexed anthropologists over the past century, and have received renewed interest in the past decade. For a historian, however, these inquiries raise questions seated in a more distant past. How did the initial process of evangelization of the Coras give way to such a complex "syncretic" tradition that melds Christian and autochthonous traditions? This paper returns our gaze to the eighteenth century, to seek the roots of Cora appropriation of an outside religious faith, cast in the

²José de Ortega, *Marvillosa conquista y reducción de la provincia de San Joseph del Gran Nayar, Nuevo Reino de Toledo*, (Mexico City: Layac, 1944 (1754)) 166.

³Adriana Guzmán Vázquez, "Mitote y universo cora," (Licenciada thesis, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1997) 9.

⁴Guzmán Vázquez 10.

light of their own spiritual patterns and beliefs. Evangelization is often thought of as a one-way process, as missionaries teach neophytes; here I will argue that evangelization was and is an interactive process, complicated by the multiple meanings attributed by Indians and Europeans in the colonial crucible.

The Jesuits and their World

The importance of Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Jesuit missionaries for the settlement and evangelization of the New World and Mexico specifically would be difficult to overestimate. They served as a critical religious presence for diverse groups of colonists, natives and the emergent creole and mestizo society of Mexico, prior to the establishment of the secular clergy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their contribution was even more vital and longer lasting on the frontiers of New Spain, throughout the colonial period and beyond. They worked amongst myriad indigenous groups, in very difficult conditions, often paying with their lives (being "martyred," as their black- and brown-robed chroniclers would put it) when their mission appeared threatening to native livelihood or customs. These were the "foot soldiers of Christ" on the front lines of what they referred to as the "spiritual conquest" of Native America.

Early in the twentieth century, the esteemed University of California historian Herbert Bolton "invited his readers to move beyond the romantic hagiography and the Californian focus of the English-language mission histories of his day, to see the frontier mission as a key institution of Spanish colonialism throughout the Americas."⁵ The manifest goals of the frontier missions were to "convert, civilize and exploit" native peoples. In effect, Indians were to be schooled in the tenets of Spanish civilization, from religious beliefs and practices to work regimes to dietary and other cultural prescriptions. The end goal was to produce not a new caste of indigenous "gente de razón" ("rational people," or full citizens) but rather a dutiful mass of hard-working vassals who knew their place in colonial society. Among Bolton's many contributions to the discussion of frontier missions was the critical recognition that conversion, civilization and exploitation were in fact complementary aspects of a single goal. This would be accomplished by gathering the "unreduced savages" into centralized and closely supervised communities, teaching them Christian doctrine and practice, apprenticing them to trades, and educating them in the finer points of living as subjects in Spanish colonial society -- in effect, to "acculturate" them. In practice, however, the results of the missionary encounter transcended the simple kinds of changes which this now outdated term from anthropology usually suggests.

As on other frontiers, the missionaries were concerned with the elimination of what they saw as *idolatria*, or "idolatry." The meanings of this term were multiple and

⁵David G. Sweet, "The Ibero-American Frontier Mission in Native American History." In *The New Latin American History*, edited by Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 2-3. Bolton's classic lecture on the subject was published as Bolton, Herbert E. "The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish-American Colonies." *American Historical Review* XXIII (1917) 42-61. Bolton supervised over 100 Ph.D. students at Berkeley, including the Jesuit historians Peter Masten Dunne and John Bannon, whose works tended toward the romanticism of the missionaries which Bolton was seeking to root out.

shifted through time. In general, however, the term was used to describe practices and evidence of rituals that represented an autochthonous-rooted religious tradition at odds with the Christianity being taught by the missionaries. The Nayarit missions, coming at the end of the colonial period, did not typically experience large scale “extirpation” programs; rather, this was an ongoing struggle engaged in on a day-to-day basis by individual missionaries with the support of the Presidio. The reports from the field were contradictory as to whether idolatry, or the autochthonous religious tradition, persisted during the period of Spanish control.

Who was Padre Ortega?

There is a tendency for historians to depend on one key documentary source for the outline of their narratives, using fragmentary archival sources to fill in around the edges. (Perhaps the clearest example of this is the attachment that historians of the conquest of New Spain have to the account by Bernal Diaz, written some fifty years after the event.⁶) For many years, the principal source for colonial history of the Coras was a narrative history of the province attributed to the Jesuit Padre José de Ortega. Padre Ortega lived among the Coras for over 25 years, and therefore probably was the source of the fine ethnographic detail in this history. Beyond that, the book was probably a collaborative effort, polished up prior to publication in Barcelona in 1754.⁷ A closer consideration of this work can help clarify the realities of mission life in Nayarit under the Jesuits.

After a thorough description of pre-conquest Cora history in painstaking ethnological detail, Ortega concludes that the Jesuits were able to “tame” the Coras after a few years; and that from then on, despite occasional opposition, on the whole they were willing servants of the Spanish King and God:

Having defeated these two enemies [idolatry and drunkenness], the padres then found it very easy to impose upon the Indians a proper way of life, which can be seen today: everyone knows their prayers and Christian doctrine; in most of the towns they pray the rosary daily...all of the adults confess and take communion annually, and in some cases more frequently: all of the towns...have amply constructed churches...Finally, whoever comes to this sierra leaves full of admiration of that which in so short a time has been accomplished by the omnipotent arm of God...⁸

At the same time his great book was being written, however, Ortega himself expressed in private correspondence a rather different view of the progress of the spiritual conquest of the Sierra:

⁶ Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (New York: McBride, 1927 (1868). Conquest narratives invariably follow the footsteps of Bernal Diaz, while attempting to understand the conquest from the native perspective as well.

⁷ The introduction to the 1996 version details the controversy over the authorship of the text. See Thomas Calvo and Jesús Jáuregui, “Prologo” in their edition of *Apostólicos Afanes de la Compañía de Jesus en su Provincia de México* (México: CEMCA/INI, 1996).

⁸Ortega, 218-219.

All of the padres are afraid for their lives, the presidios are powerless; without twenty more soldiers all may be lost...already I have sent Padre Jacome Doye to La Mesa because his life is in danger being alone...⁹

As this letter indicates, the twin evils of idolatry and drunkenness were probably not eliminated by the time Ortega penned his history; apparently father Doye and his salvaguardia were not able to maintain order, much less claim that their neophytes had accepted the yoke of Christ and Crown.

Naturally, the different judgments of the efficacy of the missions that are expressed here may be due largely to the intended audience of each document. The historical narrative was published in Spain to gather support for the missions in America, and therefore emphasized the successes while stressing the continuing challenges that faced the valiant padres. The letter to Ortega's superior was an internal document meant to portray the Sierra Jesuits as hard working, but permitted a franker discussion of the continuing stubbornness of the Coras.

The seemingly contradictory views of Ortega suggest the dynamic of the evangelical encounters in the Sierra. This portrait can be complicated still more, if we consider an earlier Latin version of Ortega's history that can be found in the William B. Stevens collection at the University of Texas in Austin. The Latin version mirrors the Barcelona text, but culminates in a more critical look at the state of evangelization of the Coras.¹⁰ Ortega and his collaborators thus were inconsistent in their characterization of the problem of idolatry. Additional documents from the colonial period bear out the continuing concerns that the padres had about the persistence of native tradition, though they too were powerless to completely stop this.¹¹

Jesuits Come to Nayarit

With the advantage of hindsight, a little more is known about the missions in the Sierra del Nayar. As in other places in northern and western Mexico, the Nayarit Jesuits were preceded by Spanish conquistadors and by Franciscan missionaries. The situation at the start of the Nayarit missions was, however, unique. Most of the Jesuit missions were far to the north of the Sierra, which tended to isolate this mission province. Since the surrounding areas had been subdued by Spanish forces and evangelized by Franciscan missionaries a century or more before the establishment of the Sierra missions, the historical context for the coming of the Jesuits was very different from that in which their forbears had carried the Gospel to the Yaquis or Tarahumaras. Most importantly, the Coras living in the Sierra were not "untouched" by Spanish colonialism during the years between the first Spanish occupation of western Mexico and the 1722 military victory at the Cora capital of Land as we have seen the occasional interaction over a long period of *détente* had *prova* Mesa. Thus, the Coras possessed a good deal of intelligence about the workings of missions and of the colonial order. They had

⁹AGN Provincias Internas 85.

¹⁰ UT WBS 1378 "Hisotoria de Nayarit 1730." The first few pages of this unsigned document have been destroyed, but the nearly 200 pages of text is remarkably similar to the history published in Barcelona, though less self-congratulatory about the missions in some sections.

¹¹ Additional stories of idolatry can be found in chapter five of my dissertation, "An Ethnohistory of the Coras of the Sierra del Nayar, 1600-1830," University of California Santa Cruz 1998.

come to understand the implications of being evangelized; and for this reason they continually refused missionaries, even in the final years of their independence, as they sought to forge political agreements with the Spaniards through which they would surrender their control of the Sierra.

Establishment of the Missions

Once the Spaniards had gained military control of La Mesa, they wasted no time in establishing a religious presence as well. Fathers Antonio Arias and Juan Tellez had accompanied the conquering expedition, and they stayed behind to begin the process of building the missions. The Coras were gathered together in several new mission compounds, or incipient pueblos. How this was accomplished is not yet clear; but we do have some demographic information for these establishments. The following towns were initially founded in 1722:

Santísima Trinidad (La Mesa) 55 families, 288 persons.

Santa Gertrudis, 111 families, 447 persons.

Santa Teresa de Miraflores, 54 families, 244 persons.

Jesús María 85 families, 392 persons.

San Francisco de Paula, 66 families, 241 persons.

San Ignacio de Guaynamota, 93 families, 369 persons.

San Pedro de Ixcatlán, 70 families, 283 persons.

San Juan Bautista, 46 families, 190 persons.

Nuestra Sra. de la Peña de Francia, 49 families, 164 persons.¹²

All together, some 629 families including 2588 persons were brought under direct missionary supervision. Four of these mission towns were the sites of military garrisons, or presidios: La Mesa, Santa Gertrudis, Jesús María, and Guaynamota.

Baptisms proceeded post-haste. Arias and Tellez had baptized sixty persons in La Mesa shortly after the military victory there. Arias left Tellez in La Mesa, traveling north to found the mission at Sta. Gertrudis, by drawing the Coras in from two rancherías, headed by the caciques whom they baptized and named Don Nicolás and Don Vicente. Arias decided to have the town separated into two barrios, to respect the differences between these groups. While he was there, he baptized 200 people.¹³

The military commander Flores, perhaps due to some unseasonal torrential downpours which occurred over a period of several days, felt the need to return to the construction of his presidio at La Mesa. Arias preferred to travel on to Quaimaruzi, now Santa Teresa, from Sta. Gertrudis with six soldiers whom Flores provided for his protection. There Arias was able to baptize another 100 Coras, a task made easier, Ortega reports, by the fact that number of people there were suffering from an illness from which they found relief shortly after encountering the padre. Still, he notes, those who attended the first mass came armed with their bows and arrows.¹⁴ No presidio was established in Santa Teresa; and this

¹²AGN Indios 98, 2.

¹³Ortega 181.

¹⁴Ortega 182-183.

determination together with its geographical position on the fringes of the Sierra enabled the town to maintain an independent attitude after the invasion of the colonizers.

The rule for counting mission Indians in these frontier institutions was not so much residence or attendance at mass, as the number of baptisms. Throughout the colonial period there was a running debate among missionaries as to whether to baptize Indians early on, before they truly understood the gospel, or to wait until they were better educated as Christians. In this case, the first procedure was adopted, which raises several thorny questions regarding the conversion process and the Coras. Like many native peoples, the Coras had, and have still today, their own rituals purifications by water.¹⁵ Thus, Coras may more readily have accepted baptism than the other Christian sacraments, or the obligation of regular attendance at mass.

The Jesuit period in the Sierra del Nayar lasted from 1722 until their expulsion from Spanish realms in 1767, The few extant letters from the padres to their superiors portray the missions as alternately vibrant and dormant communities.¹⁶ Coras would attend mass when living at the mission, but would frequently leave for the surrounding hillsides for long stretches. Interestingly, this pattern continues today, as Coras will spend the dry season in the towns and leave during the growing season (April to October) for their *milpas* located outside the towns. Increasingly, they also travel to the surrounding lowland regions to work on the tobacco and marijuana plantations. Most of the agricultural ceremonial cycle transpires during the dry months in the settlements today, culminating with the *semana santa* ceremony mentioned above.

The padres were certainly distressed that their neophytes would not remain in the mission compounds throughout the year. A generalized goal of the mission system was to “reduce” wandering peoples to a sedentary lifestyle. On this score, the missionaries would seem to have failed, since Coras continued their previous agricultural patterns. But what of their religious tradition? Did Coras persist in their previous, “idolatrous” activities, or did they adopt the Christian beliefs that the padres worked so hard to instill?

With the departure of the Jesuits in 1767, Coras were left briefly without priests in the Sierra. This void was quickly filled here as elsewhere by members of other orders, in this case by Franciscan friars from the province of Jalisco. With the changes in religious personnel, and a subsequent shift in the administration of the presidio at La Mesa, Coras might have seen an opportunity to return to their older ceremonial tradition (“backsliding,” in missionary lingo).¹⁷ There has been a tendency to assume that the good work of the Jesuits was undone in their absence, and could not be repaired by the (inept?) Franciscans. A closer look at the story of

¹⁵See, for example, Guzmán Vázquez, 84-85.

¹⁶ The best of these letters are found in AGN Provincias Internas 85 and AGN Jesuitas I-6, I-28 and I-16.

¹⁷ This issue is taken up by Marie-Areti Hers in . “Los coras en la época de la expulsión jesuita.” *Historia Mexicana* XXVII.1 (1977): 17-48. Hers concludes that the traditional Cora ceremonial tradition was kept alive without much change through the mission periods, arguing against others who claimed that it merely re-ignited in the power vacuum created by the departure of the Jesuits.

one particular Cora shaman, who had been evangelized by Jesuits as well as Franciscans, tells a rather different story.

The Trial of Manuel Ignacio Doye

Like many Coras who had converted to Christianity, Manuel Ignacio Doye took as his Christian surname the nearest moniker available--that of the missionary stationed in his region.¹⁸ In the long run this did not, however, ensure his loyalty to Church and Crown. Manuel Doye participated along with the chieftain Tonati (Juan de Acuña) and many others, in the 1758 rebellion at La Mesa, the most serious threat to the colonial order in Nayarit since the initial resistance there in 1722. Following the repression of that revolt, Doye and the others went underground for a decade, and following the departure of the Jesuits and the ineffective Commander Oca, Doye's position grew even more tenuous.

Some of the perennial difficulties between missionaries and presidial personnel in Nayarit concerned the propensity on the part of the latter to make deals with rebellious Indians as a means of keeping the peace. The soldiers recognized the impossibility of the task foisted upon them of putting down idolatry wherever it reared its head, and they preferred by and large to ignore this illegal behavior. This attitude was of course seen by the missionaries as a means of undermining their authority. Two commanders in particular were singled out for criticism by the padres: Pedro Gatuño (1761-1763) and Manuel de Oca (1764-1768). The latter was particularly upsetting to the Jesuits, who claimed that he had an "implacable hatred" for them, which was representative of the growing official opposition to their order.¹⁹ In a letter from Padre Antonio Polo to his Padre Provincial in Mexico City, for example, it is claimed that Oca was allowing the Indians to continue their "gentilic mitotes" in the hills, at which the Devil was always "in attendance." In Oca's view, these were no more than merry celebrations (*jácaras*);²⁰ and he showed no interest in pursuing Doye or any other rebellious indigenous leader. For his part, Oca accused the missionaries of "bad conduct and tyranny...they treat the Indians like Berber slaves."²¹ Perhaps Oca's viewpoint can be understood as a sign of the general intellectual climate of eighteenth century Enlightenment, whose views of native people were increasingly indulgent. More likely, however, Oca was pursuing a policy of non engagement encouraged by a lackadaisical attitude toward the pursuit of frontier justice.

The Crown, for its part, was not happy with either the missionaries or the Commander. Oca left on the heels of the Jesuits, having been fired for his frequent absences from the Sierra.²² The Franciscans who succeeded the expatriated Jesuits were instrumental in bringing about his removal. The new commander was Captain Vicente Cañaverall Ponce de Leon (1768-1771), who began post haste to prosecute idolatry, and as far as possible to build positive relationships with the missionaries.

Once Cañaverall learned of the activities of the infamous Manuel Ignacio Doye, he made it a priority to seek him out. Doye had been lurking in the region's shadows for years, the missionaries continually distressed by the stories that swirled around his

¹⁸Today, the surname "Doye" is common in Santa Teresa, although it has come to be pronounced "dway."

¹⁹AGN Provincias Internas 85, 11, f. 175; Jean Meyer, ed., *El Gran Nayar*, (México: CEMCA, 1989) 160, hereafter *EGN*.

²⁰Meyer *EGN* 173; APMM, APA-G, V-I, 1418.

²¹AGN, Provincias Internas 127 f. 31/5; Meyer, 174.

²²AGI Guadalajara 511. The visitor Marques de Rubí found that Oca was absent without reason in his inspection of April 3, 1768, and had made off with the account books to Guadalajara.

leadership in the clandestine celebration of traditional Cora rites. As Agustín Christoval, an imprisoned confidant of Doye would later testify, "for a long time, he had commanded us with sovereignty in Santa Teresa and San Francisco."²³ In the same collection of testimony an older woman named Micaela admitted having two religious artifacts obtained from Manuel which she guarded in an altar located close to the lake near Santa Teresa, in a place called "Tecuat-sap." These were a long white stone and a decorated prayer arrow.²⁴ Francisco the carpenter, after receiving more than 200 lashes, revealed that Manuel's sympathizers

were made to swear obedience...about his offenses. He [Manuel] made others believe that although they might be arrested...when the time came to be set free he would cut off the heads of all who had offered testimony against him.²⁵

Clearly, Manuel Ignacio Doye was a powerful shaman. He may have inspired fear as well as obedience, though these supporting statements were made under duress. In any case, Doye was a force, though not the only force, in the continuation of a ceremonial tradition that was at odds with Spanish Christianity, and with the colonial order itself. For eighteen months during 1768-1769, Cañaveral's forces hunted for Doye. They heard that he was staying near Huejuquilla; and in late September 1769, Sergeant Lázaro Ortiz traveled there with four soldiers. They were discouraged from their search their search by the same Padre Bugarín who had visited the Sierra less than a year before, claiming that "the commander punishes the Indians too severely." But the squadron traveled on; and on October 19 of that year they finally caught up with Doye, taking him by surprise in a cave outside of the town of Santa Teresa. He was promptly arrested and imprisoned, in the presidio at La Mesa, along with his assistant Catarina and her brother Nicolás Santos.²⁶ In 1770, Catarina escaped from confinement; but Santos and Doye were transferred to Mexico City early in 1771. Soon after, Santos was released, on the condition that he not return to the Sierra. It is not known whether he honored this agreement. For his part, Manuel Ignacio Doye was sentenced to ten years of forced labor by Viceroy de Croix, to be served at the presidio in Havana.²⁷

This new commander, Vicente Cañaveral, engaged the "idolators" in numerous other battles during his short tenure. In contrast with Oca, he was a career officer and man of letters for whom this frontier assignment was something of a culture shock. The Indians with whom he had before were more docile subjects of the Crown, long since brought under the thumb of Spanish colonialism. From the moment of his arrival at La Mesa in 1768, therefore, he steadfastly pursued all reports of un-Spanish behavior in the surrounding mountains, and he worked effectively with the missionaries to identify the guardians of the several hundred "idols" which he and his men managed to uncover at Cora ceremonial sites. Unlike Oca, this man was serious about his extirpation. When

²³Meyer *EGN* 192; AGN Provincias Internas 85, 21.

²⁴Meyer *EGN* 192; AGN Provincias Internas 85, 21.

²⁵AGN Provincias Internas 85, 21 f. 387; Meyer 192.

²⁶Meyer *EGN* 192-193.

²⁷Meyer *EGN* 194-195.

José Antonio Bugarín arrived to carry out his *visita* in 1769, he found numerous Coras already imprisoned at the presidio in La Mesa.²⁸ Cañaveral was serious about his work.

The Visit of Bugarín

Another view comes to us from the beginning of the Franciscan period, prior to the capture of Doye. The process of changing over the missions to Franciscan hands was difficult, in that the friars had absorbed more than a hundred other missionary posts in Mexico.²⁹ A thorough accounting of the material goods of the missions, from agricultural supplies to church vestments, was made here as on other ex-Jesuit frontiers, and were recorded as the “temporalidades.”³⁰ Once the new missionaries were in place, the religious hierarchy wasted no time in extending their investigation beyond these elements of material culture.

Shortly after the arrival of the Franciscans, the bishop of Guadalajara, Diego Rodríguez de Rivas, commissioned a secular priest from Huejuquilla named José Antonio Bugarín, to investigate the progress of the Nayarit missions.³¹ At least one scholar has argued that the Bugarín visit was motivated by a desire to discover more about the accusations of idolatry which had been made by missionaries and presidial personnel in recent years.³² Bugarín visited all seven Sierra missions, interviewing missionaries, soldiers and Indians. His standardized questionnaire engaged areas as diverse as the climate, physical state of churches and missions, agricultural and other supporting activities of the Indians and, perhaps of greatest interest, the persistence of "idolatrous" traditions. Answers to the latter group of questions yielded some vivid descriptions about the continuing adherence of the Coras to ceremonial traditions involving specific forms of "idol worship" and mitote celebrations.

Several Coras, usually of advanced age, admitted freely to Bugarín that they had participated in “idol worship” and *mitotes* (ceremonial dances). The ceremonial sites and rites were located and held away from the town centers. Juan Diego of Yscatan, when interviewed in La Mesa, admitted dancing in mitote celebrations at a cave, where there were some prayer arrows found and later removed by the Presidio commander.³³ Sixty-year old Nicolás Lopes Quasiveri, a Cora from La Mesa, admitted to possessing an idol that had been passed down to him by his father, and this was also confiscated.³⁴ Manuel de la Torre³⁵ of Jesús María, 40 years old, claimed that he had participated annually in a mitote at a site in the mountains called los Picachos. An idol used in this ceremony known as “Taté,” or our mother, was also confiscated by the presidial authorities.³⁶ A

²⁸AGI Guadalajara 511.

²⁹Francisco Morales, O.F.M., “Mexican Society and The Franciscan Order in a Period of Transition, 1749-1859,” *The Americas* 54:3 (1998) 322.

³⁰AGN Temporalidades 218.

³¹Original documents from the Bugarín visit are found in the Archivo Histórico of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in the Anthropology Museum in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. These were published recently by Jean Meyer: José Antonio Bugarín, *Visita de la Misiones del Nayarit 1768-1769*, ed. Jean Meyer (México: CEMCA/INI, 1993 (1768)).

³²Lino Gómez Canedo, “Huicot: Antecedentes Misionales,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 9 (1987) 135.

³³Bugarín 94.

³⁴Bugarín 96.

³⁵Perhaps a family name appropriated from the first conquistador of Nayarit, Don Juan de la Torre?

³⁶Bugarín 105.

variety of other descriptions of these ceremonial objects indicated that the pantheism of the Coras had survived the Jesuit period. Another theme that pervaded the Indians' answers was millenarianism, specifically a concern that the rains might not return, thus spelling the end of their world. This was offered up on several occasions to explain the continuance of the old ways.³⁷

Fray Navarro Discovers Syncretism

Later reports from the Nayarit missions indicate that the struggle against idolatry continued throughout the Franciscan period, with similar ineffectiveness. Fray José Antonio Navarro, longtime *comisario* of the Nayarit missions, wrote in 1777 that he had destroyed more than three thousand idols in two hundred ceremonial sites during his eleven years there!³⁸ Even allowing for some exaggeration here, the persistence of Cora ceremonial tradition was all too obvious to the missionaries at the time. Several Cora deities were represented by the *idolos* he found; and Navarro was eloquent in characterizing them:

there were many idols and gods which they adored, and to each one was attributed a distinct virtue. Some would facilitate births, others were helpful for child rearing, for valor, for plentiful harvests, healthy stock animals, healthy seedlings...there were many [gods] but five among them were the most appreciated, believed to be universally virtuous. The first was the Sun, for whom they built a temple in La Mesa, where the church is now. The second [god] was *Xura*, which in Spanish means Lucero [Lucifer], who they called "our older brother," because they believe that this shining star was the son of the Sun...[the third god] was *Teate*, which in our language is the same as "the mother God," who was an old Indian woman, who excelled beyond all others as a priestess...and who after death had been transformed into two white transparent stones...this idol had her temple in the same place where the church at San Francisco de Paula [*visita* of Jesús María] now stands...the fourth was *Naye*, their first king [Nayarit]...the fifth and last was *Cuanamoat*, to whom they confessed as their Redeemer.³⁹

As the nineteenth century approached, this experienced missionary recognized idolatry for what it was from a Cora viewpoint: a continually developing indigenous religious tradition, that now shared some aspects with Christianity. This rudimentary ethnography by Fray Navarro might indicate a new Cora synthesis of Christianity and the older tradition, since the second and fifth deities are described in dual terms. Perhaps the friar and his colleagues hastened the development of this dual or syncretic tradition by making these connections themselves. In any case, since the turn of the twentieth century, Coras have been well-known for their unique Christianity that merges Catholic teachings with

³⁷Bugarín 96.

³⁸*Boletín de Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico)* (1-2) 1905-1906, 351.

³⁹BAGN 1-2, 352. Navarro, like Ortega, employed the past tense in writing about these elements of Cora religious culture; but it is clear that he was describing beliefs still current among his parishoners.

traditional beliefs; the process and dating of this gestation is a subject of concern in recent Nayar ethnographies.⁴⁰

Conclusions

Missionaries in both the Jesuit and Franciscan periods tried vainly to eliminate “idolatry,” though their efforts were as effective as plugging holes in a dike with fingers; eventually one runs out of digits. Yet, Coras did attend mass, especially during the dry season. Moreover, they learned the Passion Play from the missionaries which has developed into the colorful ceremony seen in the Sierra today. After the departure of the missionaries in the 1830s, the Coras spent nearly a century without resident priests, yet maintained elements of Christianity, according to early anthropological visits.⁴¹ The merging of the belief systems as noticed by Fr. Navarro seems to have begun in the colonial period, and was recreated through the nineteenth century by Cora shamans.

Following the comments made about idolatry by the missionaries reveals the concerns of these priests about the incompleteness of the conversion. Though we can understand much about the missionaries’ views, The central issue of the Indians’ reaction to these declarations of idolatry is unfortunately not as clear from the record, though there are some interesting indications from the missionary writings. The fact that idols are found throughout both missionary periods should speak for itself: the Coras were not about to discard their traditional rituals simply because the missionaries and presidio soldiers insisted upon it. Moreover, the interviews by Bugarín indicated that Coras were willing to freely offer up information about these idols and ceremonial centers, indicating that they saw nothing unnatural in subscribing to both traditions. There is no mention of coercion by Bugarín, and punishments at this juncture were not severe. The continuation of traditions at the cave at Toacamota and with the adoration of the skull of Nayarit points to a cosmological view that is deeply rooted in history.

Cynthia Radding notes that in the province of Sonora, “the divergent forms of religious expression that emerged...composed over time a palimpsest of symbolic meanings that were complex and even contradictory in their implications.”⁴² In this light scholars can better understand the so-called syncretism of Cora religious belief and practice. Stories of “idolatry,” in their great variety, can serve as ethnographic data for a better understanding of the persistence of and intricate changes in Cora religious traditions. Christianity was not completely rejected, nor was it “a layer of oil over Mesoamerican magic.”⁴³ Rather, the concepts, rituals and artifacts introduced by the missionaries offered Coras the opportunity to expand their religious consciousness.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Philip E. (Ted) Coyle’s dissertation “Hapwán Chánaka (‘On Top of the Earth’): The Politics and History of Public Ceremonial Tradition in Santa Teresa, Nayarit, Mexico,” University of Arizona, 1997 (book version forthcoming from Arizona UP); and that of Johannes Neurath, “Las fiestas de la Casa Grande: Ritual agrícola, iniciación y cosmovisión en una comunidad wixarika” Ph.d. thesis from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998.

⁴¹ See the works of Konrad Theodor Preuss, especially *Die Nayarit Expedition*. (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von B. G. Teubner, 1912).

⁴² Cynthia Radding, “Cultural Boundaries Between Adaptation and Deifance: The Mission Communities of Northwestern New Spain,” in Nicholas Griffiths and Fernando Cervantes, *Spiritual Encounters: Interactions between Christianity and Native Religions in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) 130.

⁴³ Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994) 58.

Thus, as in the Sonoran case, Coras readily accepted certain aspects of Christianity, such as personalized saints, as “helpful talismans and intercessors in the ongoing struggle between human and cosmic forces.”⁴⁴ More work needs to be done to flesh out the intricacies of these beliefs and their histories.

In thinking about the process of religious change and conversion, we are handicapped by a frequently held assumption that conversion is like a light switch, either on or off. Surely, the missionaries conceived it this way, which accounts for the view that baptisms are the best statistic for counting the Christian population. Yet just as baptism has different meanings for the receiving population (Indians on other frontiers sometimes asked to be baptized repeatedly!), evangelization in general is always sifted through the world view of the recipient. Thus, on this and other frontiers a “syncretic” view develops, most markedly visible in the Nayarit Holy Week celebrations, but in evidence more subtly elsewhere.

Scholars have grappled to find adequate language for this negotiated process of conversion and change. Miguel Leon-Portilla labeled it “nepantlism,” the world of in-between, which suggests a rather static model. Richard White writes of the “middle ground,” in which white and Indian cultures interact in the specific historical context between Indian and white political hegemony.⁴⁵ Jorge Klor de Alva developed a typology along a sort of spectrum between total conversion and total rejection of Christianity, in which most believers fell somewhere in between.⁴⁶ Most recently, Carolyn Dean suggested that Andean elites “responded to colonization with and through *tikduy*, a Quechua concept indicating the powerful conjoining of complementary opposites.”⁴⁷ All of these approaches share the desire to see the “subaltern” subject actively involved in the production of the newly merged post-colonial tradition. These models are helpful to the extent that they understand religious change as an active, ongoing and mysterious process, one that outside observers (missionaries and scholars) as well as the participants may only partly understand.

As for the colonial period Coras, they saw no contradiction in adhering to their tribal traditions as well as to elements of Christianity. Our ability to understand their beliefs then, or now, will be hastened if we eschew reductionist models of syncretism in favor of preserving the mystery of the stories they have kindly left us.

⁴⁴ Radding 119.

⁴⁵ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge, 1991).

⁴⁶ Jorge Klor de Alva, “Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain: Toward a Typology of Aztec Responses to Christianity,” in G. A. Collier, R. Rosaldo, and J. Wirth, eds., *The Inca and Aztec States, 1400-1800: Anthropology and History* (New York, Academic Press, 1982) 345-366.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) 3.

SIERRA DEL NAYARIT PERIODIZATION

Late 16 th century	Nuño de Guzmán conquers surrounding lowland areas
17 th Century	Franciscan Missions from Xalisco and Zacatecas on Perimeter of Sierra
	Several European “Entradas” into Sierra
	Runaway indigenous and blacks take refuge in Sierra
1715-1722	Sierra is “conquered,” La Mesa del Nayar is occupied
1722-1767	JESUIT MISSION PERIOD
1768-1830s	FRANCISCAN MISSION PERIOD
1858	Last Franciscan leaves Sierra
1904	Parish of Jesus María Established
1959	Franciscans Return to Sierra

ARCHIVE ABBREVIATIONS

AGI	Archivo General de Indias, Seville
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación, México
APMM	Archivo de la Provincia del México Meridional de la Compañía de Jesús (Polanco, Mexico City)
BAGN	Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación, México
BANC	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
BN	Biblioteca Nacional, México
AF	Archivo Franciscano
BPJ	Biblioteca Pública de Jalisco, Guadalajara
FF	Fondo Franciscano
UT WBS	University of Texas, William B. Stevens collection, Austin

