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Incomplete Conversions: Intentions of Indigenous
Idolatry in Early Colonial Latin America

A Thesis in
History

by

Amanda Boos

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Incomplete Conversions: Intentions of Indigenous Idolatry in Early Colonial Latin

America

Amanda Boos

Introduction

In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull granting Spain the right of conquest to any lands previously unknown to Europeans that Christopher Columbus encountered on his journeys.¹ The king and queen of Spain already proved their dedication to conquering the world for Christianity as they completed the centuries long *Reconquista*, reclaiming the Iberian peninsula from Islamic rule.² Ferdinand and Isabel were called “*Los Reyes Católicos*,” Catholic Kings, because of their fierce desire to either convert or expel all Jews and Muslims from Spain; their zeal assured the pope they were the right monarchs to preside over the conversion of non-Christians in their newly conquered lands. With Columbus’ first steps on the shore of Hispaniola the indigenous peoples of Central and South America became dominion of the Spanish and an opportunity to extend the reach of Catholicism in the world. Converting the Indians of Latin America was an undertaking that dwarfed the *Reconquista* in sheer size and resources needed. In Spain the Christians were dealing with known quantities in the Jews and Muslims. The Jews, Muslims, and Christians residing in Spain were connected by a common language and general

¹ Pope Alexander VI Demarcation Bull Granting Spain Possession of Lands Discovered by Columbus, May 4, 1493, The Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, accessed March 25, 2015. <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/a8119023-abaf-4643-a874-593456184480>

² Chris Lowney points out the difficulty of defining “Spain” in medieval times because “Christian Spain, for example, was a patchwork of kingdoms (e.g., León, Castile, Aragon, Navarre) that remained independent throughout some or all of the medieval period before falling under unified leadership in the Spain of today.” Chris Lowney, *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6. For the purposes of this thesis “Spain” refers to the various kingdoms that were brought under the unified rule of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile when they married and eventually inherited the rule of those lands. Also, I use the term “Spanish” to indicate agents of the Spanish Monarchy such as conquistadors and clergy who sought to implement policies of the Crown.

understanding of each other's cultures; all that was necessary for the *Reconquista* was force of arms and political maneuvering which led to the power to expel enemies.³ The situation in Latin America was not one of a minority reclaiming its place atop the social and political hierarchy as the *Reconquista* had been; the Spanish were invaders imposing their religion on a completely foreign population who had no knowledge of Christianity. Physical conquest was a challenge the Spanish were prepared to face, they viewed themselves as superior warriors with better weapons and military organization to subdue their foes. Some of their most potent weapons were the European diseases that they carried, which wrought havoc on the Indians whose bodies were unfamiliar with the new illnesses and had no built up immunity. However, force and illness, while important for military conquest, were not the tools necessary to conquer the Indians religiously.

The Spanish and the Pope saw the Indians as innocent children who needed to be educated in the ways of Christianity, not forced to convert as Jews and Muslims had been. When they were expelled from Spain Jews and Muslims did have the choice of leaving the country (and their wealth) or converting to Catholicism; many made a show of converting so they could continue living the life they had built for themselves, but secretly practiced their own religion in the privacy of their homes. The Spanish Inquisition was established in part to discover and punish these false converts; this institution eventually made its way across the ocean to the Spanish colonies. The Inquisition's purpose in the New World was to monitor settlers, both

³ During his reign from 1252 to 1284 Alfonso X of Castile turned the local vernacular language of Castilian into an official language used for documents and official business. "Latin was set aside as the antiquated and extraneous final step, to be replaced by the transformation of Castilian from the merely instrumental- the mother tongue in which men had perforce to speak to each other, the true lingua franca of the interfaith community- into a noble written language." María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Bay Back Books, 2002), 224-225. Thus, while Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin were still used for religious purposes Castilian eventually became the language of the mundane, used for communication among people of all faiths residing together within the kingdoms of Castile.

Spanish and European, to assure that Jews, Protestants, or false converts did not create a safe haven from the Inquisition in Spain.⁴ A new continent far from the eyes of the Pope or the Inquisitors of Europe was ideal for the persecuted peoples of the time to escape to and live without harassment; however, this idea was not lost on the Spanish and they sent the Inquisition to safeguard against any possible settlement of non-Catholics. However, even as non-Catholics the Indians did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition due to their lack of knowledge of Catholicism and the behavioral and moral expectations of the church. The Inquisition was also meant to monitor the general morality of the colonists punishing offences such as blasphemy, bigamy, adultery, sorcery, or idolatry.⁵ It is this last offence, idolatry that is the focus of this thesis.

Scott Sessions points to Martín de Valencia as the first church superior to “condemn Indians to the stake for practicing idolatry,”⁶ before the arrival of the Inquisition, but Patricia Lopes Don indicates that Juan de Zumárraga was the first to use the powers of the Inquisition against the Indians.⁷ Whoever it was that first instituted punishment against the Indians for idolatry it is certain that in the 1530s in Mexico there was a large push by the Franciscans to seek out Indian idolatry and punish it. However, at the end of the 1530s the overzealous friars who prosecuted and executed Indians were removed from their positions of power because “the trials of Indians for paganism or idolatry were ... always lacking the support of the crown of Spain.”⁸ As previously narrated the Spanish and the Pope had a paternalistic view of the Indians, they

⁴ Patricia Lopes Don, “Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1543,” *Journal of World History* 17 (2006): 34

⁵ Scott Sessions, “Inquisition: The Inquisition in the New World,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 4504.

⁶ Sessions, “Inquisition,” 4504.

⁷ Lopes Don, “Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1543,” 34.

⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

understood the challenges involved in converting an unknown group of people to Catholicism and did not support the use of the Inquisition to punish the Indians for religious transgressions because they were not educated enough to commit such sins purposefully.⁹ Patricia Don Lopes examines how Jews and Muslims were treated under the Inquisition and seeks to answer the question of which group most paralleled the Indians. Jews who falsely converted to Christianity were treated more harshly than their Muslim counterparts, mostly for political and military reasons, which led to the Concordia of 1528 in which the crown agreed that “*moriscos* would not be subject to the Inquisition until the third generation after conversion, according to the Inquisitor General, ‘since it would be impossible for them to shed all their customs at once.’”¹⁰ To answer the question that Lopes Don poses it seems the Crown was content to treat the Indians as Muslims and wait for at least three generations after the initial conversion to hold the Indians accountable for any acts of paganism or reverting back to their own practices. This is perhaps the reason that the crown did not support the initial trials of Indians, and was still hesitant to do so some thirty years later when another wave of idol extirpation hit Mexico.

The continuous need that the Franciscans felt to punish idolatry shows that Indians worshipping their idols was a prevalent problem, but what I wish to examine is why it was so prevalent and what the motivation behind it was. The Franciscans obviously thought that Indian idolatry was proof that Indians were either backsliding into their old ways, or they were rejecting Christianity outright with brazen displays of idolatry. However, I believe there are many factors that led to the Indians holding on to their idols and continual worship of them. I argue that Indian trials for idolatry in the 1530s and later in the 1560s were misguided and unjust because there

⁹ Lopes Don, “Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1543,” 28 and 30.

¹⁰ Ibid, 30

were factors during the conversion process that impeded the Indians' ability to fully comprehend Christianity and what was expected of them. While the priests saw Indian idolatry as a rejection of Spanish and Catholic rule I believe it was a way for the Indians to contextualize their new religion within their own framework in order to understand it better. There were many opportunities for the Indians to misinterpret the message of Catholicism because of the way it was taught to them. Most Indian cultures practiced the tradition of incorporating new gods into their pantheon, and perhaps for them the Christian god was another to integrate. In order to show that Indian idolatry was not initially a form of resistance or rejection this thesis will look at different factors that affected how different groups of indigenous people were exposed to Christianity and why the way they were taught led them to believe that their idol worship was not forbidden. Examined here are the parallels between Pre-Columbian religions and Catholic mythology, the importance of idols or sculptures in everyday life of indigenous people, and the problem of language the Spanish faced when instructing the Indians about a concept as abstract as religion. Indeed the idea of changing an entire indigenous population's religion was more than showing them how to worship as a Catholic and teaching them what to believe, as Timothy Steigenga points out, "within the social science literature on conversion, there is a general consensus that conversion involves a process of radical personal change in beliefs, values, and, to some degree, change in personal identity and worldview."¹¹ Worldview and religion are deeply intertwined as they can both affect each other and the challenge of changing one indicates a necessity to change the other. The Spanish could tell the Indians their idea of the sun as a god was wrong, but this was not only negating their religion, but how they lived their lives based on what they believed. The title "Incomplete Conversions" refers to the fact that despite their best

¹¹ Timothy J. Steigenga, "Religious Conversion in the Americas: Meanings, Measures, and Methods," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 34 (2010): 77.

efforts the Spanish could not completely eradicate the way the indigenous peoples of Latin America interpreted the world around them, which meant the Spanish could not completely convert the Indians to a Catholic mentality.

Conquest and Conversion

Spain's first steps in its mission of conquest and conversion was to dismantle the political and military organization of Indian communities and install Spanish governors to rule over indigenous people. Henry Kamen points out that the Spanish Crown did not send a large army to the New World in order to conquer it. Instead, it depended on small groups of men who were not all trained soldiers to subdue the Indians.¹² The bands of a few hundred men faced the armies of the Aztec and Inca Empires and somehow brought them down despite being outnumbered on foreign soil. The Spanish used the political circumstances of the indigenous peoples to their advantage by allying themselves with enemies of the central power. The Aztecs controlled a network of cities in Mexico by intimidation; cities who rebelled against the capital of Tenochtitlán faced swift retribution from the Empire's army.¹³ There were a number of cities that were hostile to the Aztecs and Hernán Cortes exploited that hostility to defeat the much larger army of the Aztecs. He allied himself with the Totonacs, Tlaxcalans, and Cholulans before he entered Tenochtitlán, thereby increasing his numbers by the thousands.¹⁴ It took Cortes, his Spanish men, and his indigenous allies two years, from 1519 to 1521, to bring down the Aztec army. The Spanish did not come to Latin America and easily take control; there were indigenous

¹² Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power 1492-1763*, (New York: Perennial, 2004), 95-96.

¹³ Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 21-22.

¹⁴ Kamen, *Empire*, 100.

massacres of Spanish men in unfamiliar terrain and much resistance when the Indians realized the true intent of the Spanish.

In 1532 Francisco Pizarro met with the Inca ruler Atahualpa in the city of Cajamarca. The meeting ended with Pizarro's capture of Atahualpa and demand for a hefty ransom. After the ransom was paid Pizarro executed Atahualpa anyway, but as Kamen states, "the Inca empire was not yet overthrown, only beheaded."¹⁵ There was armed resistance against the Spanish in Peru in the first five years after Atahualpa's death, but the Spanish withheld their attackers with the help of indigenous allies who had always opposed the Incas.

Once the Spanish subdued the Indian armies, the next step in conquest was to maintain control over the vast Indian population; to this end, the Spanish instituted the *encomienda* system. The *encomienda* system "consigned groups of Indians to privileged Spanish colonists who were charged with supervising Indians' Christian indoctrination; the grantees (*encomenderos*) in turn were entitled to receive labor and tribute in goods from the Indians inhabiting the assigned lands."¹⁶ The *encomienda* achieved many goals: it separated Indian populations into smaller concentrations under the close supervision of Spanish colonists and it relegated the status of Indians to servants and provided cheap labor for the Spanish. Once the Indians were settled into villages, friars began their attempts at conversion. Friars from different religious orders arrived quickly after the conquistadors in order to take part in the evangelization of the indigenous people. The first friars sanctioned by the Pope to begin missionary work in the Americas were Franciscans, while Dominicans and Augustinians followed shortly after. The first

¹⁵ Ibid, 109-110.

¹⁶ Rolena Adorno, "The Polemics of Possession: Spain on American, Circa 1550," in *Empires of God: Religious Encounters in the Early Modern Atlantic*, eds. Linda Gregerson and Susan Juster, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 23.

friars to arrive in Mexico in 1524 were called “The Twelve,” or “Cortes’ Apostles,” because they believed their mission reflected that of Jesus’ original twelve apostles. Upon their arrival in Mexico, the Twelve split into four groups of three and dispatched to different cities to begin their work. In the early months of the conversion process, before they constructed churches and monasteries, the friars met in houses of local chiefs to preach to the village children, and later the adults, but their initial sermons relied on pantomime to communicate ideas, which resulted in rote repetition of words and signs that the Indians did not truly comprehend.¹⁷ (Chapter 3 will examine the problem of language in the conversion process). As time progressed the friars built monasteries that also acted as schools for the indigenous children; male children went to school to learn reading, writing, and the catechism while girls learned the catechism and the skills appropriate to their future roles of wives and mothers. Initial education focused on children who had less experience with the spiritual world than the adults did and therefore had less connection to the significance of rituals and objects in their lives. However, the clergy did not ignore adults, in the early days of evangelizing, they performed mass baptisms of native adults as the first step to conversion, but they were more judicious in their performance of the more important sacraments until they could further educate the Indians.¹⁸ The different religious orders did not all adhere to the same evangelization methods, but they strived for the same goal: a Catholicized indigenous population.

In Mexico after the fall of the Aztec Empire the indigenous population was scattered in various cities, posing a challenge to the missionary effort. In order to consolidate the Indians into

¹⁷ Doris K. Arjona, “‘The Twelve’ Meet a Language Requirement,” *Hispania* 25, no. 3 (1952): 260.

¹⁸ Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523-1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 283-295.

communities that were easier to control and oversee the conversion process the Franciscans created *doctrinas*, or Christian townships. Indians were resettled from their homes into the new communities “normally taking the form of a compound with the church building in the middle and service huts and Indian residences forming a large circle around it.”¹⁹ The missionary system in Latin America was different from in Europe because in Europe the goal of missionaries was to combat the Protestant Reformation by visiting towns to revitalize the spiritual life of its congregants. Missions in Latin America were more permanent settlements where friars taught indigenous people to live like Christians and practice Catholicism.

The missionaries often clashed with Spanish settlers as they competed for the resource of Indian labor. Settlers wanted Indians to work on their *encomiendas* and moving them to mission settlements removed them from the labor pool. Once resettled in the missions the Indians were forced to change their agricultural customs; instead of producing just enough food for themselves they were forced to produce a surplus to be sold and earn money for the missions.²⁰ Indians on the missions were supposed to be protected by the friars, but they were exploited for their labor and eventually the friars used violence as a form of education. Whipping and flogging became a standard practice to punish the Indians for any number of infractions, from outright resistance to saying prayers too slow.

Robert Ricard identifies two methods of evangelization that the Spanish used: the first he calls *tabula rasa* in which every aspect of indigenous culture is considered corrupt and must be eradicated, the missionary must wipe out every institution that came before him and start fresh, building new religious, political, and social institutions from scratch. The second method is one

¹⁹ Kamen, *Empire*, 267-268

²⁰ *Ibid*, 269.

in which the indigenous culture is not considered corrupt because “however decadent its beliefs and institutions, is not totally in error and sin, for hidden among the most backward is at least a modicum of truth and an obscure aspiration toward light and perfection.”²¹ He points out that in Mexico missionaries used both methods, which seems antithetical. The Spanish wanted to destroy the religious concepts that came before their arrival, but used those institutions in the form of mythology and language to make connections between Catholicism and the indigenous world. The inherent contradictions in the evangelizing processes the Spanish used contributed to the continuation of indigenous practices after conquest because there was no clear strategy to end them. By using indigenous concepts to teach Catholicism, the Spanish unwittingly signaled their sanction of what they later deemed idolatry.

Literature Review

The difficulty with a topic that seeks to determine intents of Indians in the colonial world is that their voices do not speak through colonial documents without the influence of the Spanish. Few pre-conquest indigenous books survived the Spanish colonization process, if they existed to begin with; documents supposedly written by indigenous authors at the time of conquest are undoubtedly influenced by the Spanish chroniclers and translators. In early studies of indigenous Latin Americans historians had to rely on mostly post-conquest documents to interpret pre-Colombian indigenous beliefs and practices. As more temples and buildings with ancient hieroglyphics intact were discovered at Pre-Colombian archaeological sites previous theses about pre-Spanish indigenous life were either confirmed or altered based on the information found at

²¹ Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, 284

these sites because they were untainted by Spanish influence.²² These discoveries also corroborate the stories told in some of the post-conquest manuscripts like the *Florentine Codex* for the Aztecs and the *Popul Vuh* for the Maya.

Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España, also known as the *Florentine Codex* because it was in possession of the Medici family in the late sixteenth century and placed in a museum in Florence, is the most complete record of Aztec mythology. It was compiled in the 1540s while there were still indigenous elders who could record their Pre-Spanish practices. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún was a Spanish Franciscan friar who saw the necessity of learning about Aztec religious beliefs and social practices in order to better understand their importance and use that knowledge as a tool for converting the Indians to Catholicism. Sahagún's work is widely considered by scholars to be anthropological in nature due to the subject matter and his process of obtaining information; in order to record the history of the Aztecs and their beliefs Sahagún "devised a summary of all the topics he wished to cover, ... gathered a group of high-born *Nahua* elders ... and asked them questions relating to his summary."²³ The elders recorded their knowledge in their pictorial writing system which was then put into phonetic Nahuatl using the Latin alphabet by Sahagún's native students who used their cultural experience to put the stories together in a cohesive collection and provide any additional information the friar may have asked for. Sahagún then translated the Nahuatl accounts into Castilian, however, in the 1950s scholars

²² The Templo Mayor of the Aztec City of Tenochtitlán was found in Mexico City in 1978 which changed the previously held notions about the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. Most scholars believed human sacrifice was either a form of punishment, but it was actually the Aztecs recreating their creation story in order to keep the world going. Aztec artefacts are still being uncovered in the streets of Mexico City today. Roger Atwood, "Under Mexico City," *Archaeology Magazine* June 2014, <http://www.archaeology.org/issues/138-features/2173-mexico-city-aztec-buried-world>.

²³ Victoria Ríos Castaño, "From the 'Memoriales con escolios' to the Florentine Codex: Sahagún and his *Nahua* assistants' co-authorship off the Spanish translation," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 20:2 (2014): 214.

studying the Florentine Codex such as James Lockhart, Ángel María Garibay Kintana, Miguel León Portilla, and more started to call into question the assumption that the Nahuatl to Castilian translation was primarily completed by Sahagún without much input from his native assistants. These authors looked at the syntax, rhetorical style, grammatical errors, idiomatic expressions, and other literary elements of the final Castilian translation of the Codex to analyze the voice of the author and determine if it was more Indian or Spanish. None have come to a definite conclusion, most assuming there was collaboration between the two voices rather than crediting Sahagún with the entire translation.²⁴ Despite the questions surrounding the authorship of the final Castilian translation of the *Florentine Codex* it remains the most complete account of the history of the Aztec people and their religious beliefs as told by the people themselves.

James Lockhart has done extensive work on the *Nahua* (Aztec) people immediately following the arrival of the Spanish as well as in depth study of the Nahuatl language used by Pre-Colombian Aztecs. The sources I use for this paper, *We People Here* and *The Nahuas After the Conquest* are seminal works in colonial Latin American history as he delves into the primary sources of the conquest providing the original Nahuatl and Spanish texts along with his English translations in order to present the Spanish conquest from the Indians' point of view. Lockhart studied, learned, and analyzed the Nahuatl language in order to translate documents from the indigenous language rather than rely on the Spanish translations which were influenced by the Spanish cultural worldview of their authors. He found a way to let indigenous people communicate in their own voices and revolutionized the way historians study native texts, delving into the nuances of indigenous languages to more fully understand their writings. *The Nahuas After the Conquest* is a more detailed analysis of the immediate aftermath of the

²⁴ Ibid.

conquest on many social and cultural aspects of Aztec life. Lockhart describes the everyday life of the Nahuas before the conquest and how it changed after the Spanish arrived; he includes the mundane of daily routines as well as the larger issues of language, government, and religion. The inclusion of everyday behavior shows Lockhart's dedication to giving a voice to the Indians and telling their whole story rather than focusing only on the major political repercussions of conquest.

A frequent collaborator of Lockhart's was Frances Karttunen who specialized in the language, both spoken and written, of the Aztecs. Her publication *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* made the language accessible to a wider range of people, not solely historians and linguists, but anyone with an interest in the Pre-Colombian Aztec culture. However, it is her work on post conquest Aztec culture that is important here. Karttunen has used her background in linguistics to examine how the Aztec kept their culture alive after the conquest and continued to adapt their traditions so they would survive in a Spanish world. In her article "After the Conquest: The Survival of Indigenous Patterns of Life and Belief" Karttunen sought to dispel the previously held theory that the Aztec belief system and ways of life disappeared completely after the Spanish conquest and show instead how Aztecs adapted to Spanish social, political, and religious systems by blending the two cultures. She examines Aztec writings during the colonial period, not only the immediate aftermath of the conquest, to show how Aztec literature evolved from pre-conquest times and kept evolving with more prolonged exposure to Spanish; however, in Karttunen's opinion the evolution of Aztec culture and its adoption of Spanish systems does not represent a disappearance or abandonment of indigenous culture, merely a method of camouflage and survival.

The most complete record of Maya mythology is the *Popul Vuh*, a book written in Mayan hieroglyphics that was destroyed during the conquest. The *Popul Vuh* studied today was written in alphabetical Quiché, a Mayan language, by indigenous scholars under the supervision of Spanish friars and was then translated into Castilian. Dennis Tedlock took on the massive task of translating the *Popul Vuh* from the original Quiché to English; like Lockhart with Nahuatl Tedlock did an intense study of the Quiché language in Mexico and Guatemala as the translation would be more authentic as opposed to translating from the already translated Spanish version. Following in Tedlock's footsteps Allen Christenson completed his own translation of the *Popul Vuh* from Quiché to English; he underwent the same journey as Tedlock in Guatemala and Mexico learning the nuances of Quiché. While consulting both versions I chose to use Christenson's account because I find it to be written in a more accessible language. Dennis Tedlock's work was groundbreaking, but it has a distinctly scholarly tone whereas Christenson's later work presents a more engaging narrative that captures the story telling feel of mythology. Christenson references Tedlock's work to explain general consensuses in his field about translations of certain words as well as provide historical notes about places or ceremonies referenced in the text. He also provides a history of the original manuscript, a pronunciation guide for Quiché words, and a literary analysis about how the book was written; he addresses the poetic nature of the language used such as literary devices, word order, and different types of parallelisms when words have some sort of relationship. I find Allen Christenson's work to be extremely thorough, well written, and an all-encompassing resource about pre-Colombian Maya history and religion.

For post conquest Maya history I refer to Inga Clendinnen who has written extensively on the interactions between the Spanish and Maya in the early colonial period. Her studies focus on

the conflict between the two groups with an emphasis on the cruelty suffered by the Indians at the hands of the Spanish, especially the Franciscan missionaries. Clendinnen emphasizes the Mayan perspective of the conquest and how the Mayan culture survived under the adverse conditions of subjugation. She focuses on religion because it caused the most friction between the Indians and the Spaniards, but also because core Maya religious beliefs helped them reconcile their fate as a conquered people. In her major work on the conflict of the Maya and Spanish *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* Clendinnen combines Spanish records with information gleaned from the few indigenous resources of the time to reconstruct what the Indians were doing at the time of conquest as well as comparing sources to find discrepancies in accounts written from different points of view. She tries to ascribe intent to indigenous actions during their Christian conversion and subsequent idolatry trials. The use of the word ambivalent in the title suggests that there was something incomplete about the conquest over the Maya both physically and spiritually, this is a theme that permeates Clendinnen's work.

In her various writings Clendinnen argues that the Maya had a tradition of accepting subjugation to conquering forces and waiting for them to move on as they always did before returning to their old ways; her thesis stems from an intricate examination of the Mayan calendar combined with the mythological shape of the world.²⁵ Clendinnen reaches the conclusion that the Maya believed time was cyclical and “‘history’ was, simultaneously, prophecy, and prophecy became history again with the next swing of the cycle;”²⁶ therefore, the Maya believed that each conquering force would eventually move on and they would return to power so they must have

²⁵ Inga Clendinnen, “Landscape and World View: The Survival of Yucatec Maya Culture under Spanish Conquest,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22 (1980).

²⁶ *Ibid*: 383

seen the Spanish as just another turn of the wheel and waited for them to pass. This is an interesting argument because it delves deeper than the customary story of conquest where the European power comes in with better weapons to easily decimate and enslave the native population. This does not intend to imply that the Maya's strategy was to immediately surrender and wait for their time to come again, but once they recognized they were beaten militarily they looked to their past to ensure their future. I believe that Clendinnen's theory of "ambivalent conquests" along with the Maya tradition of incorporating new gods into their pantheon and the fact that they could draw parallels between Christian myths and their own led the Maya to believe that keeping their idols and old system of worship was not defying the Spanish.

The challenge of Inca history is that the Inca did not have a written language system like the Aztec and Maya did; instead, they relied on *quipus*, a system of knotted, colored cords to send messages and keep records (mostly secular) throughout the empire. Some scholars refer to the *quipus* as the Inca system of writing even though it did not involve any sort of alphabet or traditional writing instruments like other cultures; however, those who have studied the surviving *quipus* in depth believe that every aspect of the *quipu* relays a different meaning. Color of the cord, the direction of the knot, the type of knot, the placement of the knot on main string or off of subsidiary strings all contribute to the message contained in every *quipu*.²⁷ Little is known about the language of the *quipus*, but it is known that they were used mainly for bureaucratic record keeping such as census information, tax or tribute records, or messages sent between Incan

²⁷ In the early 2000s anthropologist Gary Urton created the Khipu Database Project that contains all the information he learned from his exhaustive analysis of every string and knot of all the quipus he has examined. He uses this database to look for connections between different quipu and possibly a way to decode their meanings, like a "Rosetta Quipu." From Chris Hardman, *Unraveling an Inca Mystery*, Americas, September-October, 2006. For a detailed analysis of quipus see Gary Urton's book, Gary Urton, *Signs of the Inka Khipu: Binary Coding in the Andean Knotted-String Records*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003.

officials. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, few *quipus* survived the Spanish conquest since they destroyed the *quipus* as they had done with written Aztec and Maya records and because the Spanish did not take the time to understand the *quipus* and transcribe their information it is all lost along with the Indian voices they represented. Although the *quipus* were not used as religious “texts” and could not provide a comprehensive history like the *Florentine Codex* or *Popul Vuh* more examples of intact *quipus* could have provided more insight into the workings of the Inca Empire and possibly revealed now long forgotten secrets. However, historians must rely on the Spanish accounts of the time of conquest and historical chronicles they recorded from oral stories, but even Indian tales of Inca history were unreliable because the oral tradition in which they were passed down led to many variations and contradictions in the history the Inca elders told to the Spanish.²⁸ Adding to the difficulty of studying Inca religion is the fact that there were different versions of religion co-existing in the empire at the same time due to the large territory that the empire controlled. Individual villages throughout the region may have had different mythology than that of the capital or worshipped the same gods in different manners. Because the Inca Empire incorporated many different conquered peoples it is impossible to declare that all Incas worshipped the same way or held the same beliefs, but there was an official religion of the empire practiced by the ruler and nobility in and around the capital city of Cuzco, and that is the system of worship that is most often studied.

Sabine MacCormack focuses much of her work on the Andes region on the perceptions of gods, demons, and idols both from the Spanish and Andean point of view. Her writing focuses on how the Spanish understood and perceived Andean concepts of divinity at different points in the conquest and how their perceptions changed based on their increasing knowledge of Andean

²⁸ Chris Hardman, “Unraveling an Inca Mystery,” *Americas*, September-October (2006): 52.

culture. The Andean's understanding of their own rituals also changed over time as the people during the conquest became further removed from the religion of their ancestors as they were exposed to Catholicism. In her book on the subject of Andean religion, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru*, MacCormack uses the words vision and imagination to describe how the Spanish and Andeans interpreted the world around them differently; vision describes the physical reality and imagination describes the power ascribed to that physical reality. Two men, a Spaniard and an Inca, could look upon the same object and understand it as two different things. Such as the shrine of Pachacamac where the Spanish pillaged the holy site and upon finding the image of the god to be nothing more than a small, roughly carved wooden idol they ridiculed the priests for worshipping such a pathetic image while the priests insisted that wooden figure was indeed the actual god.²⁹ MacCormack offers this tale as a prime example of imagination because the Spanish did not reject the idea that the wooden figure spoke to the priests, they simply believed it to be the voice of the Catholic devil rather than the Incan god. They also relied on their sense of Spanish paternalism to reason that the Indians were so easily fooled by the devil because they were naïve and uneducated in the proper ways of Catholicism therefore their imaginations were simple and vulnerable to the devil's tricks. Sabine MacCormack's work is important because she tracks the evolution of Andean religion through the eyes of both the Spanish and Andean people and does not only show the Spanish imposition of ideas on the Indians. By using the idea of imagination to explain the differences between the Spanish and Andeans MacCormack shows how cultural context influenced perceptions of divinity during the conquest, and as more cultural understanding was

²⁹ Sabine MacCormack, "Gods, Demons, and Idols in the Andes," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006): 626.

exchanged between the two groups their perceptions and imaginations of each other and of religion changed.

With their research the authors listed here sought to give a voice to the indigenous people of the Spanish conquest and portray them as active participants in adapting to their new ways of life under Spanish rule, not as passive actors blindly following the systems imposed on them. Their work allows new generations of historians to look at the conquest from the perspective of the Indians by providing the information necessary to hear indigenous voices through the documents of the conquest. These authors undertook the enormous task of understanding the language of indigenous people so they could give them back their words, their voices, untainted by the influence of the Spanish. I use their work as inspiration for my own because I seek to find the motivation behind indigenous idolatry under Spanish rule and need those indigenous voices to guide me.

Chapter 1: Pre Colombian Religions and Catholicism.

This chapter will examine some of the most fundamental myths of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca religions and compare them with Catholic myths to show how similarities in the religions along with the indigenous tradition of integrating new gods into their culture caused confusion for the Indians. Understanding the importance of religious rites in the daily life of Pre-Colombian civilizations is essential to recognize the changes that occurred after the introduction of Catholicism. The myths presented here represent the indigenous beliefs the Spanish were most likely to encounter in the sixteenth century and widely practiced by indigenous rulers and nobility. Both the Aztecs and Maya had the tradition of incorporating the gods of conquered peoples into their own pantheon as a way to bring those people under control and make them part of their society, but this tradition makes it difficult for historians to trace the evolution of the official religion of the state. Another complexity of studying Pre-Colombian indigenous religion is the fact that the religion of the state did not always represent the individual beliefs and household deities important to the laypeople; the state religion may have incorporated new gods into the pantheon, but this did not necessarily affect the non-nobility as the absorption of new deities was an action taken by the state for political reasons, not the common people changing their beliefs because their state captured a new city. New deities and new myths need time to permeate the consciousness of those who believe in them, so the tradition of incorporating new gods could not have an immediate impact on the people at the bottom of the social and religious hierarchy who did not affect the change, it would take years for the entire population to come in contact with the new mythology. The incorporation of new gods was a tradition that spanned many generations and therefore it is difficult to pinpoint the moments in time when a god became part of a new mythology and became a widely accepted part of the common belief and it

is also difficult without definitive records to identify where new deities originated from, both geographically and culturally. For these reasons the mythology focused on in this thesis is that which is most widely associated with the rulers and nobility because as the Spanish endeavored to document indigenous religious practices and beliefs they enlisted the help of the indigenous people most educated and knowledgeable of religion, and those people were found in the upper class. Therefore, the Spanish records available chronicling indigenous beliefs were most likely recorded by indigenous people representative of the state religion.

The similarities presented in this chapter are nothing more than coincidence because comparing the religion of any two groups is bound to turn up similar myths of heroes, villains, and natural astronomical or climatic occurrences. The purpose of presenting these mythologies side by side is to show how the indigenous peoples' beliefs allowed them to accept Catholic concepts, but in a way that conformed to their already established worldview.

Mesoamerica: The Maya and Aztec Empires³⁰

The Maya and Aztec civilizations of Mesoamerica represent the highest civilizations that flourished on the continent before the Spanish arrival. As problematic as it can be to associate the two civilizations with each other and rely too heavily on cultural similarities it is important to note that there are influences of the culture of the ancient city of Teotihuacan on both civilizations, suggesting some sort of ancient connection. While the Spanish encountered a well-established Aztec empire centered in the city of Tenochtitlan ruled by one man, the Mayan

³⁰ I use the term "empire" to refer to the Maya, however, the Maya civilization was not a connected empire with a central ruler like the Aztecs or Incas, it was more a collection of independent city-states, each with its own rulers and dynasties. However, I feel the term "empire" encompasses the commonalities among the city-states and refers to the greater achievements of the civilization as a whole rather than focusing on the different beliefs of every city state.

civilization consisted of various city-states with different ruling dynasties for each city. Many of these city-states were in decline well before Spain itself was a unified country.³¹ 250-900 C.E. was the height of Mayan civilization, called the Classic Period, because of the advancements in mathematics, astrology, and architecture. This section will focus on the most important Mayan mythology.

The Maya worshipped the forces of nature that had the power to give or take life, such as the sun, the moon, and the rain. The *Popol Vuh*, the sacred Maya text, tells the story of creation and tales of the mythical Hero Twins.³² Recounting the entire Maya story of creation is itself a heroic feat, the portions examined here are to show the fundamental beliefs that affected the way Mayans received and understood Christianity.

The Maya story of creation begins in the Primordial World with nothing but the sky, the sea, and the group of gods who brought the world to life. In his translation of the *Popol Vuh* Allen Christenson explains that it is difficult to definitively state how many gods were involved in creation because each god had multiple titles and names.³³ However, he argues there were three “pairs of gods” as well as the god Heart of Sky involved in the creation. While it appears there are a total of seven gods each “pair” acts as a single entity, thus making the number four. The number four appears repeatedly in association with the Maya creation story and deities. The

³¹ The Maya civilization was in decline and had its downfall in 1325 at which time the kingdoms making up the Iberian Peninsula were still independent from each other and did not unite until the late fifteenth century when Ferdinand and Isabel married and later inherited their respective territories. It wasn't until 1492, when they defeated the last Muslim stronghold in Granada that all the kingdoms were united under one regime. For more information on Spain during the Colonial Era see: J.H. Elliott, *Spain and Its World 1500-1700*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

³² It is important to note that while the *Popol Vuh* is a collection of Mayan stories it is believed to be written in the 1550s when any indigenous record keeping was highly influenced by the Spaniards. However, it is still a reliable source as archaeologists have found earlier inscriptions on temples describing the same events.

³³ Allen Christenson, *Popul Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), <http://www.mesoweb.com/publications/christenson/popolvuh.pdf>.

earth and sky are described as having four corners and four sides that were measured and staked out by the gods. Gabrielle Vail examines the multiple aspects of deities, or as she calls them, “quadripartite deities.” She references the *Bakabs* as observed by Friar Diego de Landa in the sixteenth century which he described “as four brothers placed at the four cardinal directions ... the *Bakabs* are seen as separate deities and, yet as one.”³⁴ Another group of four deities are the *Chaaks* who are once again associated with the cardinal points, as well as the colors black, white, yellow, and red. These instances exemplify two of the principles of Maya religion proposed by Eric Thompson as cited by Gabrielle Vail: the quadruplicity of gods and the multiple manifestations and names of deities; the other principles put forward by Thompson are the opposing dual aspects of deities (male vs. female, malevolent vs. benevolent), the incorporation of foreign gods into Mayan deities, and the creator god, *Itzamna* acting as both the earth and sky.³⁵ Thus the “pairs of gods” and multiple names and titles of the creation deities were common in Maya mythology.

The god pairs described by Christensen are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, and They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. These were the gods of the sea, “thus they are called Quetzal Serpent.”³⁶ Although each deity has its own name they all comprise the god Quetzal Serpent. “First is Thunderbolt Huracan, second is youngest Thunderbolt, and third is Sudden Thunderbolt. These three together are Heart of Sky.”³⁷ This is another example of the quadruplicity of the gods, one god comprised of different

³⁴ Gabrielle Vail, “Pre-Hispanic Maya Religion,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11 (2000): 126.

³⁵ Vail, “Pre-Hispanic Maya Religion,” 126.

³⁶ Christenson, *Popul Vuh*, 58-59.

³⁷ Christenson, *Popul Vuh*, 60.

aspects; the sky god, Heart of Sky, is a combination of natural phenomena of the sky: thunder, rain, and lightening.

Christianity is officially a monotheistic religion, but it does incorporate aspects of polytheism with the belief of the Trinity in which God is God the Father, but has two other aspects: God the Son- Jesus, and the Holy Ghost; God the Father is the Creator, God the Son is the Redeemer, and God the Holy Ghost is the Sanctifier.³⁸ Christians argue that the Trinity is not polytheism because there is only one god, but the Holy Trinity resembles the Maya quadruplicity of gods; there is only one god, but it is composed of more than one aspect. I believe the similarity here is one factor that contributed to the way the Maya accepted Christianity. The concept of a trinity was not new to the Maya, their creator gods were four in one, so the concept of the trinity was not difficult to understand, but they could use their own culture to interpret the Trinity seeing the Christian god as three. There are other instances where the Mayan belief of the duality of gods could affect their understanding of Christian mythology. The Framer and the Shaper, and They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons are two god pairs that act as complementary forces within each pair. While one aspect makes the frame of creation the other shapes the specifics of it, and one who has borne children is a mother figure while one who has begotten sons is a father figure. Within its pair each deity completes the other as an opposing but equal and necessary force. The Christian God has its own opposing and complementary forces in the Virgin Mary and the Devil. While not technically deities the Virgin Mary and the Devil are central figures in Catholic mythology; the Virgin Mary was revered as the feminine ideal, chaste, obedient, and pious, she was both impregnated by God and at the

³⁸ David Leeming, "Trinity," in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, ed. David Leeming (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), doi 10.1093/acref/9780195156690.001.0001.

same time the mother of God. In my opinion the veneration of Mary could easily have given the Maya the idea that she was the opposing and equal force of God the Father. Mary fulfills the male vs. female role of God, and the Devil fulfills the benevolent vs. malevolent role. God created the Devil and the Devil opposes him, he is the evil in the world of good that God created. Viewing these stories with the background of the Mayan myths makes it easy to interpret one Christian God as having five aspects: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Mary the female, and Satan the evil. The Maya would have no problem seeing this god as one and five at the same time because they are all necessary to complement each other. Christians had to manage the Mayan cultural worldview at every step of the conversion process; there was no way to eradicate centuries old traditions and stories or prevent the Maya from associating new tales with parallels in their own myths.

The gods involved in the Maya creation myth tried three times to create creatures capable of venerating the gods, however, as Quiroa describes "... the creatures fell short of the gods' requirements for reproduction and veneration. The first beings became the predecessors of forest animals, the second beings (or mud people) dispersed into dust and the wooden people of the third attempt became the predecessors of the monkeys."³⁹ The fourth and final attempt to create humanity was successful: men were made of maize and water forming their flesh and blood. Four men were created this way; however, the gods did too good a job as the men had the vision of the whole earth, everything big and small in the sky and earth. The gods decided that the men's vision made them too close to godlike, and if the men had the same knowledge and vision as the gods then the men would no longer venerate them. Thus the gods blurred the men's vision

³⁹Néstor Quiroa, "The Popol Vuh and the Dominican Religious Extirpation in Highland Guatemala: Prologues and Annotations of Fr. Francisco Ximénez," *The Americas*, 67 (2011): 468, doi: 10.1353/tam.2011.0071.

so their knowledge extended only to that which was around them. Four women were then created to be companions of the men, and that was the beginning of the Maya people.

This tale of creation parallels the Christian story of the Garden of Eden told in the book of Genesis. In Christian lore God created the first man, Adam, out of dust from the earth, and from Adam's rib God created the first woman, Eve. In both mythologies the first men are made from the earth and women are fashioned to be a companion to men; as Christians believe they are descended from Adam and Eve the Mayans believed that they were descended from those original men and women of maize. The other important similarity with the Garden of Eden is the story of Eve and the Tree of Knowledge. In the Garden there was a tree whose fruit was forbidden because it would give the eater the knowledge of sin, the knowledge of God; Eve was tempted by a serpent and ate from the tree and shared with Adam, giving them both the forbidden knowledge. Because of their disobedience God punished Adam and Eve and kicked them out of paradise.⁴⁰ This story is very similar to the men with the vision of the gods from Maya mythology. In both tales the humans with too much insight must be punished or lessened because they are not allowed to have the same knowledge as the gods.

The *Popol Vuh* also relates the story of the Hero Twins as part of the creation myth. The deeds of the twins are many, but the most relevant stories for this thesis are their births and deaths. The twins' father, Hunahpu, was summoned to the underworld and was tricked by the lords of *Xibalba* and killed. The lords hung his head in a tree, forbidding anyone from cutting the fruit that appeared because of the head. A maiden, Lady Blood, went to see the tree and the skull of Hunahpu spit in her hand and impregnated her with the Hero Twins: Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

⁴⁰ Leeming, "Adam and Eve," in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, doi 10.1093/acref/9780195156690.001.0001

Years after their birth the Hero Twins were summoned to the underworld just as their father had been. The Lords of Xibalba intended to trick and kill the twins as they had done to their father, however, the twins knew the tricks and outsmarted the Lords of Xibalba. The twins possessed the ability to sacrifice themselves and others and revive them. The Lords of Xibalba saw this and asked to be sacrificed and resurrected; the twins agreed, but left the lords' body parts scattered and did not revive them. The twins then went to the head of their father who proclaimed they should be worshipped and they rose to the sky as the sun and the moon.⁴¹

The Hero Twins tale mirrors two of the most important myths surrounding Jesus Christ: Mary's Immaculate Conception and the Resurrection. The story of the Immaculate Conception tells of Jesus' mother Mary who was a virgin when God impregnated her with his son, Jesus, but she was still untouched by sin because God in the form of the Holy Spirit had impregnated her without intercourse; she then gives birth to the son of God who becomes humankind's savior.⁴² Lady Blood is similar to Mary: she was a virgin at the time of conception, she was not impregnated by way of sexual intercourse, and as a result of her pregnancy she gave birth to two of the most important heroes in Mayan mythology. While Lady Blood's story may be a bit gorier than and not as immaculate as that of the Virgin Mary she serves the same purpose in the religious lore and completes the same tasks, although she does not achieve the high status in her mythology that Mary does. The Hero Twins in this case take on the role of Jesus, who sacrificed himself and was resurrected to be the savior of mankind, while the Hero Twins used their power

⁴¹ Christenson, Allen, *Popul Vuh*, 179.

⁴² Leeming, "Immaculate Conception," in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, doi 10.1093/acref/9780195156690.001.0001

of resurrection to sacrifice themselves to defeat the evil lords of the Underworld and went on to be central figures in Maya mythology.

The Aztec empire had achieved its greatest expansion, encompassing one million people, at the time of the Spanish invasion in 1519. The Aztecs kept historical and religious records in codices, but the Spanish destroyed most Pre-Columbian codices because they believed the books were demonic. Elizabeth Hill Boone describes the different types of codices created by the Aztecs pre and post conquest; codices were painted books created by the Aztecs for keeping records of many aspects of life: religious ceremonies, historical narratives, and governmental records. The main difference between pre and post conquest codices is that pre conquest codices were strictly pictorial, using images to depict information while post conquest codices, usually completed under the supervision of Spanish friars, included long narratives in written words along with pictures, sometimes in phonetic Nahuatl (spoken Nahuatl spelled out using the Latin alphabet), sometimes in Spanish, and sometimes both.⁴³ Pre-conquest codices were destroyed by the Spanish because the books were equated with the devil and demonic practices and in their attempt to convert the Aztecs to Catholicism the Spanish tried to eradicate images and objects associated with the devil, but the tradition of codices continued under Spanish supervision. The codices used as primary sources by historians are mostly from the time when the Spanish had influence over what was recorded and those that seem to predate the Spanish are often difficult to authenticate as pre-conquest documents.⁴⁴ The most extensive codex written during the conquest is the *Florentine Codex* which was begun and completed by Nahua students under the

⁴³ Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Pictorial Documents and Visual Thinking in Postconquest Mexico," in *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone et al. (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998).

⁴⁴ Vahé Ter Minassian, "Aztec Manuscript Under the Microscope," *Guardian Weekly*, November 28, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/28/codex-borbonicus-aztec-manuscript-date>

supervision of Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún who wanted to record the history and beliefs of the Aztec people. Although the *Florentine Codex* has Spanish influences it is one of the best sources to study Aztec religion because it was written at a time when there were Nahuatl elders who remembered the pre-conquest customs, rituals, and mythology untainted by Spanish control.⁴⁵

The Aztec creation myth begins in the primordial world, before the earth. There were two forces, *Ometecuhtli* the masculine, and *Omecihuatl* the feminine, who had four children that became the gods of creation. This is one of the few instances of opposing dual forces among the Aztec gods. Multiple aspects of a god were not common for the Aztecs as they were for the Maya. The four sons of the primordial forces became the gods of creation and each was associated with a different cardinal point and color. The four creation gods show the Aztec tendency to incorporate the gods of older civilizations and conquered peoples into their pantheon. *Tezcatlipoca*, the black god of the west was the war god of the Nahuatl people, *Quetzalcoatl*, the white god of the east was associated with the ancient Toltec civilization as well as the Maya (Quetzal Serpent), *Huitzilopochtli*, the blue god of the south was an important god of tribal Aztecs. The final god of creation, the red god of the north was *Xipe Totec*.⁴⁶ These four gods created other gods and a massive sea monster that was stretched out to the four cardinal points, creating the earth in the center of its back. Similar to the Maya creation myth the Aztecs believed their world was not the first of the gods' attempts at creating humanity.

⁴⁵ Boone, "Pictorial Documents and Visual Thinking in Postconquest Mexico," 160.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Katz, *The Ancient American Civilizations* (Edison: Castle Books, 2004), 155-158.

The Aztecs believed in the Legends of the Suns⁴⁷ in which each creation was ruled over by a different god acting as the sun. The first sun was *Tezcatlipoca* who ruled over the giants that walked the earth. However, the giants were an imperfect creation because they did not know how to work the land, so *Tezcatlipoca* sent a jaguar to destroy them, giving the first cycle the name of Jaguar Sun. The second sun was *Quetzalcoatl* who ruled over humans that were not giants, but they became so corrupt that *Tezcatlipoca* turned them into monkeys. *Quetzalcoatl* then sent a hurricane to destroy them, and this cycle was known as the Wind Sun. The third sun was *Tlaloc*, another god created early during creation. *Tlaloc* also ruled over humans, but *Tezcatlipoca* stole his wife and in his anger, *Tlaloc* refused to send rain to the earth. When he finally did send rain it was a rain of fire which wiped out the world except for those who transformed into birds to escape. This was the Rain Sun. *Tlaloc*'s sister, *Chalchiuhtlicue*, ruled the fourth sun. This cycle was the opposite of *Tlaloc*'s as the rain was so frequent that the earth and its people were drowned, except for the ones who turned into fish. This was the Water Sun.

The Legend of the Suns resembles the Christian tale from Genesis of Noah and the Ark. In the Christian story God saw the corruption and sin of the world and decided to purify it by sending a flood to cover the earth so that it may be renewed. However, God favored Noah and allowed his family to live, so Noah gathered his family, the seeds of plants, and animals onto a giant ark and waited for the flood waters to recede. Noah became akin to a second Adam, father of all people, as he repopulated the world.⁴⁸ Both legends show a god unhappy with his creation because it is not worthy so he sends a natural disaster to cleanse the world and start again; they

⁴⁷ Katz, *The Ancient American Civilizations*, 157.

⁴⁸ Carl S. Ehrlich, "Noah," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) doi 0.1093/acref/9780195046458.001.0001/acref-9780195046458-e-0534.

even both end with a giant flood. The Aztecs did have more cycles to their cleansing myth, but the principle holds the same, the unworthy creations needed to be eliminated to make way for the more ideal man. Because they already had a legend of the world being created and destroyed it is possible to see how the Aztecs may have incorporated the story of Noah into their mythology; perhaps they equated their Water Sun with the flood of Noah's story.

It was during the Water Sun that *Quetzalcoatl* went to the underworld to collect the ashes of all the previous suns' creations. He mixed the ashes with his own blood and with that created humanity. The Aztecs believed they were the descendants of *Quetzalcoatl's* creation and were living in the era of the fifth sun. When the gods gathered together to start the fifth sun cycle they needed someone to sacrifice himself to become the sun. Two gods volunteered: the handsome and richly adorned *Tecuciztecatl*, and the ugly and poorly dressed *Nanautzin*. When it came time to throw himself into the sacrificial fire *Tecuciztecatl* turned away on four separate attempts. *Nanautzin*, however, charged ahead and threw himself into the fire. Seeing this bravery *Tecuciztecatl* finally sacrificed himself. *Nanautzin* reemerged as the sun, and when *Tecuciztecatl* appeared the other gods threw a rabbit into his face so he would be dimmer, and he became the moon. There was a problem though, *Nanautzin* could not move as the sun. The gods threw themselves into the fire, sacrificing themselves so the sun could move across the sky. This is how the fifth cycle and the time of the Aztec world were created.⁴⁹ The human sacrifice that the Aztecs are known for was to honor the gods who sacrificed themselves that the sun may move and give light to the earth and to continue the sun's journey across the sky. The idea of sacrificing oneself that others may live parallels the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection; in the crucifixion story Jesus goes willingly to his death so that his sacrifice "would 'save' the

⁴⁹ Katz, Friedrich, *The Ancient American Civilizations*, 157.

keepers of the reformed Covenant and lead to new life.”⁵⁰ Jesus sacrificed himself to cleanse his followers of sin and allow them to begin anew, while *Nanautzin* also sacrificed himself to allow the world of the fifth sun and man to be born. Jesus’ sacrifice did not create a new race of man as *Nanautzin*’s did, but it figuratively led to a new life for his followers and gave life to a new religion. Both figures died so that others may live and they were also both worshipped after their resurrections; Jesus was resurrected three days after his crucifixion and proclaimed “full authority in heaven and on earth”⁵¹ had been given to him and his followers should spread this news and his teaching throughout the world, forty days later Jesus ascended to heaven, to be worshiped as God. *Nanautzin* was also resurrected, but as the sun, also in the heavens and worshipped by his people. In his description of Jesus David Leeming notes the similarities in Jesus’ journey to hell to redeem humanity and *Quetzalcoatl*’s journey to the Underworld to use the ashes of previous creations to form the then current race of man.⁵² Here the two legends face the dangers of the underworld as another form of sacrifice to make previous creations worthy again. Jesus redeemed Adam and Eve of their original sin and *Quetzalcoatl* redeemed all the previous incarnations of man by using his own blood to make a race worthy of the gods. Leeming looks at this rise from the dead as a necessary event in the process of becoming a mythological hero as he also mentions the Greek hero Herakles, but I think when the comparison between Jesus and *Quetzalcoatl* is combined with a comparison of Jesus and *Nanautzin* there is an overarching idea that perhaps Jesus could have been a combination of the two Aztec gods. Because of their tendency to incorporate new gods and legends into their tradition Aztec

⁵⁰ Leeming, “Jesus,” in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid

mythology is not a set of chronological tales, often stories conflict with each other, and it was not problematic because it was a way of bringing new peoples into the empire.

One legend that exemplifies the non-linear time line of Aztec mythology is the story of *Huitzilopochtli*. *Huitzilopochtli* was an important deity for the Aztecs, however, the legends about him originated much earlier. Townsend states that *Huitzilopochtli* was probably a living person, a leader of the Mexica tribe who was later deified. The legend of *Huitzilopochtli*'s birth conflicts with the creation myth because in the legend he is born from another goddess, not the primordial forces. However, neither legend was meant to contradict the other because including *Huitzilopochtli* as a god of creation was a way of elevating him from a tribal god to a much higher status. In the legend of his birth *Huitzilopochtli*'s mother, the earth goddess *Coatlicue*, already had a daughter and four-hundred sons, the *Huiztnaua*. One day while *Coatlicue* was sweeping in the temple where she was a priestess a ball of feathers fell from the sky and landed on her breast. The feathers disappeared and impregnated her with *Huitzilopochtli*. When *Coatlicue*'s daughter, *Coyolxauhqui*, and her four-hundred brothers discovered *Coatlicue*'s pregnancy they prepared to storm the temple and kill her due to the shame she had brought. When the siblings were about to attack their mother *Huitzilopochtli* was born as a full grown man and ferocious warrior. He killed and dismembered *Coyolxauhqui* and scattered the four hundred *Huiztnaua* in all different directions. In some versions of the legend *Coyolxauhqui* became the moon and her brothers the stars.⁵³ Just like the Maya with the legend of the Hero Twins and the Christian story of the Virgin Mary the Aztec also have a story of Immaculate Conception with *Coatlicue*; she was impregnated by a divine mystical force and gave birth to

⁵³ Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd, 1992).

one of the Aztec's greatest heroes. The difference between Lady Blood and *Coatlicue* is that the latter did achieve great status and become a mother goddess.

The Andes: The Inca Empire

The Inca Empire in the Andes region included a vast amount of territory and many conquered peoples. Unlike in Mesoamerica there were no codices or books chronicling the religion and myths of the Incan Empire because their tradition was mostly oral. Due to the lack of written documents, Spanish chroniclers of the sixteenth century relied on oral retellings of the myths to document the Inca's beliefs. However, defining and explaining Inca religion was a difficult task because as Friedrich Katz points out in the Inca Empire "at least four different religions existed: the official religion of the Inca state, the religion of the educated people and the nobility of the Imperium, the religion of the conquered states, and the religion of the ayllus, local groups or individuals."⁵⁴ This section focuses on the most widely accepted and known creation myths of the Inca Empire that the Spanish documented.

There are three names associated with the Inca creation myth due to the tradition of blending the myths and gods of conquered peoples into the pantheon. The three gods that appear as creator, each separately are *Con*, *Viracocha*, and *Pachacamac*; the different versions of the creation myth appear to occur simultaneously rather than chronologically, making it difficult to distinguish definite roles for each god. *Con* was a central figure in a general creation myth; in one version he is the child of the moon and the sun, but in another he creates the sun. He was generally considered the Shaper of all things in the natural world, a task he performed by walking the land, creating all things along the way. He made humans out of stone and taught

⁵⁴ Katz, *The Ancient American Civilizations*, 298.

them how to worship him, and then he disappeared into the sky. *Pachacamac* appears in this tale as a rival to *Con*. Because *Con* left the world he created *Pachacamac* turned all the humans into animals. The worship of *Con* was not as widespread throughout the Inca Empire as *Viracocha* was considered the principle deity of creation.

Viracocha was a primordial deity who was highly regarded by many pre-Inca peoples. As an older and far reaching god of the Andes *Viracocha* was an omnipresent deity who eventually became removed from daily life; he remained a shapeless figure who created the universe. *Viracocha's* first attempt at humanity was to fashion men from stones (in some versions these men were giants), but when they disobeyed him he inundated the earth, wiping them out. Once again, there is a story like that of Noah and the flood of God wiping out his creation when he is displeased with it. *Viracocha's* second race of humans was made from clay. *Viracocha* sculpted and painted these clay figures with different clothes, gave them different languages, customs, and skills and scattered each group in a different place, creating the different nations of the Andes. He told them to remain in the earth until he called for them to arise. When his creations arose he ordered the sun, the moon, and the stars to rise from Lake Titicaca. Like *Con* *Viracocha* walked the land to spread civilization; in many versions he is aided in this by his two sons *Imaymana Viracocha* and *Tocapo Viracocha*. In the sixteenth century telling of the creation myth the gods *Con* and *Viracocha* were combined as *Con Tici Viracocha*. *Viracocha's* creation story has an aspect similar to the Christian myth of the Tower of Babel. In the Christian story the peoples of the ancient world all spoke the same language until some groups of people from Mesopotamia united to build a large tower called the Tower of Babel that would reach to heaven. God did not like that men were reaching so high so he destroyed the tower and scattered the people of the

earth into different regions with different languages so they could not understand each other and therefore not unite to attempt such a feat again.⁵⁵

Pachacamac was a deity worshipped before the rise of the Inca Empire, but when the Incas conquered most of the Andes region he was incorporated into their pantheon, but as a lesser rival to *Viracocha*. *Pachacamac* played a similar role to *Viracocha* as a creator god. He was the son of the sun and the moon who destroyed the men created earlier by *Con*. *Pachacamac* then created his own man and woman, but did not provide them food and the man died. The woman beseeched *Pachacamac*'s father, the sun, for help and he impregnated her with the rays of the sun. When the child was born *Pachacamac* became jealous and killed the boy, cut him into pieces, and scattered them among the earth. Each part of the boy grew into a different edible plant such as maize, yucca, and other fruits and vegetables.

In their study of Mesoamerican masks, the purposes and rituals, Peter and Roberta Markman look at how masks changed after the conquest, but they also question the legitimacy of any Christian conversion by the Indians calling it superficial because of “the numerous coincidences of belief and practice between the two religious systems.”⁵⁶ The belief in similarities between indigenous religions and Christianity is not new, Markman and Markman cite the prolific Mesoamerican historian Fernando Horcasitas who explains that as far back as 1794 “Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, a Dominican friar from northern Mexico ... revealed to his astonished listeners that the Aztecs has actually been a Christian people, though their Christianity had been deformed. They had worshipped God the Father under the name of Tezcatlipoca, the

⁵⁵ Leeming, “The Tower of Babel,” in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*

⁵⁶ Peter Markman and Roberta Markman, *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1989): 156.

Son as Huitzilopochtli, and venerated the Virgin Mary as Coatlicue.”⁵⁷ Jan Szeminski points to the writings of Don Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala as an example of the syncretism of Catholicism and Andean mythology as “phenomena belonging to Andean religion became part of Andean Catholicism, even to the extent of being incorporated into official structures of the Catholic Church in the Andes.”⁵⁸ Szeminski examines Ayala’s *Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno* and how the author, writing early in the seventeenth century, detailed the history of the world beginning with Adam and Eve, and the history of the Andean people before the Spanish conquest, both structured into five epochs, and drew parallels between the two mythologies within each epoch.

The comparisons I make here between the three indigenous mythologies and Christian mythologies are my attempts to expand on the study of Markman’s idea of the “numerous coincidences of belief” and show that the Indians would not have difficulty accepting Christian stories as fact and incorporating them into their ways of worship. However, I believe their own stories and their own history made them interpret the Christian myths into their way of life instead of changing their way of life because of the new religion. The similarities presented here are superficial, but they show what Catholic myths could be blended into indigenous stories to incorporate the new religion into indigenous lore as most Mesoamerican and Andean peoples had done for generations.

⁵⁷ Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, *The Religions of the American Indians* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1979): 98 as quoted in Markman, Peter and Roberta Markman, *Masks of the Spirit*, 157.

⁵⁸ Jan Szeminski, “From Inca Gods to Spanish Saints and Demons,” *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, ed. Steven Kaplan, (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 57.

Chapter 2: Saints, Shrines, Relics, and Idols

The one Catholic tradition that parallels all three groups' religions is the worship of saints. Christianity has only one god, but saints serve as intermediaries between people and the heavens. Steven Wilson traces the history of what he calls the "cult" of saints in Catholicism and explains how saints were and are chosen and the different roles they played to Catholics of different cultures and stations. Many saints of the early church were martyrs; they achieved their exalted status because they died for their beliefs in a time when their beliefs were illegal in the vast Roman Empire. As Christianity became a major religion of the ancient world sainthood evolved from martyrdom to include those who spread the word of God and performed great services to the church by converting heathens or living an exemplary life of piety; and as the religion evolved even more sainthood depended more on the performance of miracles.⁵⁹ The different stages of requirements for sainthood in Catholicism are all seen in the indigenous cultures' mythologies: the Aztecs and Maya both have stories of self-sacrifice for the good of the religion, while not exactly martyrdom in the face of an oppressive regime the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the good of the world is evidenced with the stories of the Hero Twins and *Nanautzin*. The necessity of spreading the word to heathens or those without the knowledge of God is exemplified in the Inca story of *Viracocha* and his two sons walking the earth to enlighten the Andean people and spread the worship of the sun, and finally the performance of miracles is spread throughout various myths across all three cultures.

When saints were martyred or died their tombs became holy places with shrines built upon them and objects that were near the tomb also became sacred relics; the center of

⁵⁹ Steven Wilson, *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 3.

Catholicism, the Vatican, is built upon the graves of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Peter Brown examines the cult of saints in the Catholic Church and looks more in depth at the purpose of saints' graves in ceremonies in early church history. He examines how the "ancient barrier between the private and the public"⁶⁰ was eroded as the cult of saints grew and clergy members actually performed ceremonies at the saints' tombs which became altars and public shrines, not private graves. These altars held enormous power for religious officials as control of them signaled a connection with the saint, a holy sanction. The tombs of saints took the place of the pagan oracles and shrines that served similar functions; worshippers traveled to the shrines to seek answers or cures for ailments and with the rise of Christianity people appealed to the saints and hoped their bodies would provide the holy power needed to heal them.⁶¹ The indigenous peoples of Meso and South America also had sacred places central to their worship, some were tombs of important rulers and others were geographically or geologically significant places. Sacred spaces held the same significance in both European and American cultures, they were places where the gods were spiritually present and held immense power. Shrines and sometimes great temples were built at these locations which enabled the rulers who built them to associate themselves with the gods as well as common people to travel to the shrines to make offerings and communicate with the gods.

For the Aztecs two geographical features critical to the empire were the Hill of Tetzcotzingo and Mount Tlaloc. The Hill of Tetzcotzingo was located at the base of Mount Tlaloc and contained many terraces for agricultural purposes as well as shrines to different gods.

⁶⁰ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 9.

⁶¹ Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press): 12-13.

Mount Tlaloc was named for the rain god who, along with Huitzilopochtli, was worshipped as one of the most important deities of the empire because he controlled the rain that gave life to the earth. Aztec rulers travelled to the temple at the summit of Mt. Tlaloc annually to “perform a ceremony to call forth rain from within the mountain.”⁶² In his examination of the symbolic Aztec world Richard Townsend describes how the temple had walls high enough to block the view of the world below so that the only view was of the heavens and the natural world, putting focus on the power of the natural and sacred landscape. He notes that the importance of geographically sacred spaces in the Aztec world was shown in the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan because it was built to mirror the sacred landscape of the hills and mountains.⁶³

The Maya also centered their worship around what Joel Palka deems “ritual landscapes.” Once again “impressive landscape features are the ‘communicating places’ or abodes of deities who can act benevolently or malevolently toward humans.”⁶⁴ However, caves were of greater significance to the Maya, they were linked to early mythology and symbolized the womb of the earth; many shrines located on islands or mountains and hills were somehow connected to caves in the back. These were places where people traveled to make offerings to deities and in the cases of local shrines some may have sought to communicate with ancestors believing their spirits were still present.

In the Inca Empire sacred spaces were not simply places associated with mythology or landscapes that represented the shape of the world, many sacred spaces achieved their status because people had transformed into sacred objects on those sites. *Huacas* (sometimes written as

⁶² Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 141.

⁶³ Ibid, p 152

⁶⁴ Joel W. Palka, *Maya Pilgrimage to Ritual Landscapes: Insights from Archaeology, History, and Ethnography* (University of New Mexico Press: 2014): 5.

guacas) were objects or places sacred to the Inca Empire that housed the essence of deities, rulers, heroes, or warriors and held special powers, either good or evil. Claudia Brosseder details three stories in Inca mythology of humans either being turned into stone or turning themselves into stone to become powerful *huacas*, the most important being the story of ruler Manco Capac's brothers Ayar Uchu and Ayar Auca.⁶⁵ The legend Brosseder relates starts with the mountain Huanacauri, already considered a powerful *huaca*; one day when a rainbow appeared over the mountain Ayar Uchu flew to meet with the *huaca* (mountain), but when he landed he was transformed into a stone. Ayar Uchu did not die, he lived in that stone and because it happened on another powerful *huaca* the transformation "turned the mountain Huanacauri into the mightiest *guaca* of the Incas."⁶⁶ The same fate befell Ayar Auca who was also petrified upon landing on a site in Cuzco and that site became the "cornerstone of the Qoricancha. It became a symbol of holy power unsurpassed by any other site during Incan times."⁶⁷ The *Qoricancha*, also written *Coricancha*, was the Inca temple of the Sun, dedicated to the god Inti, but it wasn't built until the rule of Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui although legend indicates that Manco Capac built a temple on the same site and the *Coricancha* was built over the original temple's structure.⁶⁸

The geographic locations sacred to the Mesoamerican indigenes earned their revered status because of their connections to and reflections of mythology; some locations were the places where myths occurred and others were representations of the mythological sites of the

⁶⁵ Manco Capac is considered the legendary founder of the Inca Empire who led his people and ten other clans of the Andes region out of their cave dwellings and into the Valley of Cuzco where he declared the gods had determined they settle to form an empire. Some versions of the Manco Capac legend depict him as a son of the gods, formed in Lake Titicaca born with the purpose of spreading civilization, much like the creation story of Viracocha and his sons. Katz, Friedrich, *The Ancient American Civilizations*, 265.

⁶⁶ Claudia Brosseder, "Cultural Dialogue and Its Premises in Colonial Peru: The Case of Worshipping Sacred Objects," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 55 (2012): 403.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Mark Cartwright, "Coricancha," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified March 09, 2014, <http://www.ancient.eu /Coricancha/>

primordial world. Catholicism built its shrines and temples on the physical resting places of its most important members, saints, and those places became just as important as the saints themselves. Similar to the Incan belief that *huacas* contained a spirit the early saint worshippers believed that the grave site of a saint was especially sacred because “the saint in Heaven was allowed to be ‘present’ at his tomb on earth.”⁶⁹ The presence of the saint was a link to Heaven and thus made the physical space more powerful and holy, just as the presence of ancestors, spirits, or deities at Mesoamerican sites imbued the locations with a sense of power. When the Spanish tried to eradicate indigenous practices and beliefs they could not take away the natural features of the world that were so important to indigenous worship; the Spanish could not take away the mountains, the caves, the sun, or other naturally occurring phenomena.

Saint worship is an acceptable way to practice polytheism within a monotheistic religion; however, saints are not gods in the way the Aztec, Maya, and Inca worshipped multiple gods, but they are divine figures who hold power over different aspects of life. People pray to specific saints to help them with specific needs; for example, St. Margaret is said to aid women in childbirth, St. Anthony helps find lost objects, St. Nicholas was the patron saint of law students in Paris, St. Agatha helps women with breast issues, and St. Clare helps with eye problems.⁷⁰ This is the same practice as indigenous groups with their many gods; both Christian saints and indigenous gods were worshipped and feared at the same time as they could intercede on behalf of or against the supplicant. Having a patron saint or god, usually of a city, was a method of protection as well as a threat to enemies who incurred the saint or god’s wrath. In medieval Europe cities claimed to be protected or favored by different saints who had some connection to

⁶⁹ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 3.

⁷⁰ Wilson, *Saints and their Cults*, 17-18.

the area: perhaps the saint was born in the city, died in the city, or his remains were found there. In indigenous cultures ancestors played the role that saints played for Catholics, acting as powerful forces in the spirit world on behalf of their descendants.

The discovery of alleged saints' remains and the subsequent devotion to that saint by a city or region reinforced the belief in the power of the physical body of the saint or objects that were in his or her tomb eventually led to relics and their worship.⁷¹ Relics are holy objects in the Catholic faith and can be either pieces of items significant to Catholic mythology such as wood from the cross on which Jesus was crucified, or the personal effects of venerated people like saints, but the most powerful relics are usually pieces of or the entire body of a saint. One of the most avid collectors of relics was King Philip II of Spain who built the monastery of El Escorial to house his vast assemblage of relics that he collected over the years in his effort to gather the bones of all the Spanish saints.⁷² The case of King Philip II as described by Guy Lazure is perhaps an extreme example of Catholic relic worship and not necessarily the norm among medieval Catholics, but it shows the potential relics had to influence the lives and faith of Catholics.

Lazure explains how King Philip II used relics as a foundation of his image and power as a Catholic monarch; Philip, along with other rulers believed that possessing saints' remains signified a "tangible sign of the divine approbation of these monarchs' rule, justifying their claims to sacral kingship and providing them with political continuity and legitimacy."⁷³ King

⁷¹ I use the word "alleged" here because there were very few ways to authenticate the identity of bones or confirm who they belonged to unless there was a chain of evidence or documentation proving where the remains came from, otherwise any person could dig up a skeleton and claim it was that of a saint.

⁷² Guy Lazure, "Possessing the Sacred: Monarchy and Identity in Philip II's Relic Collection at the Escorial," *Renaissance Quarterly* 60 (2007): 58-93.

⁷³ Lazure, "Possessing the Sacred," 66.

Philip built an enormous monastery and palace, called El Escorial, to house his massive collection of relics and to serve as a burial place for himself and his other royal relatives, thereby creating another link between the crown and the sacred; by placing bodies of his predecessors in the same location as saints' remains he equated his blood line with the divinity of saints which strengthened his claim of rule through divine right. Another reason for Philip's obsession with relics, especially those of Spanish saints, was his goal to unite the various kingdoms under his rule and create a national Spanish identity through the Catholic faith.⁷⁴ By collecting the remains of saints that were associated with different regions of his kingdom Philip hoped to secure the loyalty of those people by associating himself with their regional saints. Consolidating the saintly history of the country under the King's central authority was also an attempt to unite the people through a common history as if to demonstrate that the saints did not belong to only the people of their region, but to the entirety of the Spanish people. In addition to the symbolic power the relics held for King Philip he also believed in their mystical powers, especially those of healing as he credited the "relics of the monk San Diego de Alcaclá with saving his heir don Carlos from a nearly fatal head injury."⁷⁵ In his final days King Philip "in an effort to imitate the holy martyrs and transfer their thaumaturgic power to his own person, he asked ... to have relics corresponding to his aching limbs directly applied to his open wounds."⁷⁶ Philip's Protestant critics pointed out the irony of his devotion to his relics who called it idolatry, the same issue the agents of the Crown were trying to eradicate in its colonies among the indigenous people.

⁷⁴ As previously stated the country of Spain in the 1500s was made up of smaller kingdoms which conform mostly to the modern day provinces and during Philips II's reign he was still trying to exercise political control over them and consolidate authority with the Crown rather than local lords.

⁷⁵ Lazure, "Possessing the Sacred," 59.

⁷⁶ José de Sigüenza, *Historia de la Orden de San Jerónimo*, 1605. Ed. Ángel Weruaga Prieto. 2 vols. Valladolid, 2000 542-543.

The term idolatry is a loaded word because the simple definition of worshipping an object does not indicate the negative connotations that word has in the Christian faith. During the Protestant Reformation in Europe beginning in the 1500s one of the criticisms of the Catholic Church was its tendency to put importance on the religious authorities on Earth above God, this included priests and the Pope. One of Martin Luther's main arguments was that the average person could speak directly with God and know Him through their own prayers and reading of the Bible so intermediaries were not necessary to devotion and this included idols such as images and statues of saints and the Virgin Mary and the relics so precious to King Philip II.⁷⁷ The Catholic use of the term idolatry refers not to their own practices of saint worship or veneration of images, but the indigenous practices of worshipping objects and putting false gods above the Catholic God. The use of the word idolatry when referring to practices of indigenous people is a Catholicized description of their practices and implies a sinful intent of the Indians to subvert the first commandment to place no god above the Catholic God, for this reason I will only refer to indigenous practices as idolatry when describing them from a Spanish point of view, but in this section I will examine practices involving sacred objects among indigenous people.

Aztec Sacred Objects

In summary of Sahagún's immense work, *The Florentine Codex*, David Carrasco explains that the interviews conducted with the purpose of recording Aztec mythology and history revealed to the Spanish "a sophisticated social, linguistic, and ceremonial world in which merchants and kings, slaves and warriors, women and men, farmers and shamans, and priests and

⁷⁷ For more information about the Protestant Reformation see: Michalski Sergiusz, *Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Questions in Western and Eastern Europe*, (London: Routledge): 1993.

artists interacted to produce a highly stratified, intensely ritualized, wealthy urban society.”⁷⁸ With one sentence, Carrasco explains the difficulty of examining Aztec daily or religious life; every person had his own specific role to play in keeping the empire and the world in balance. The highly ritualized lifestyle of the Aztecs was meant to ensure that all people played their parts in appealing to and appeasing their deities for favor and continued good fortune. Because the Aztec world was so ritualized all people could be involved in the realm of the sacred, it was not reserved only for priests and nobility, although their roles were more important in the state religion and they participated in the official ceremonies that common people could not. However, just as commoners could interact with the divine in their own lives there also existed the possibility for mundane objects to become sacred.

In many religious ceremonies there was a person dressed in the style of the deity to whom the ceremony was dedicated, sometimes a priest or sometimes another impersonator who would be sacrificed to the deity after performing the role for a set amount of time. According to Christina Elson and Michael Smith in their study of “Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony,” during these ceremonies the person dressed as the deity was not seen as simply an actor, rather, “the impersonator, or *ixiptla*, was thought to become infused with the divinity’s ‘essence.’”⁷⁹ Because the impersonator held the essence of the divinity, any object he or she touched also became imbued with the divine essence such as “musical instruments, objects used in games, and hunting implements.”⁸⁰ Thus, items not traditionally thought of as sacred could become so through the presence of a deity residing in within it. Richard Townsend

⁷⁸ David Carrasco, *Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011): 9.

⁷⁹ Christina M. Elson and Michael E. Smith, “Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony,” *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 12 (2001): 159.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*

dissects the use of the Nahuatl root word “teo” as a way of explaining the importance of objects in Aztec religious life. From a Spanish point of view, the use of “teo” with the suffix “tl” could mean a variety of things: god, saint, demon, but Townsend explains that the ubiquitous use of “teo” in Nahuatl texts shows a much broader definition of the concept than the Spanish presumed. According to Townsend,

Studies of the word *teo* show that it appears in Nahuatl texts in a variety of contexts. Sometimes it accompanies the names of nature-deities, but it was also used in connection with human impersonators of those divinities, as well as in association with their sacred masks and related ceremonial objects, including sculptured effigies of wood, stone, or dough... The diverse contexts of the word *teo* suggest that the Aztecs regarded the things of their world – both transitory or permanent – as inherently charged to a greater or lesser degree with vital force or power.⁸¹

These three authors explain how the idea of divinity among the Aztecs extended beyond the deity or the image thereof, every object held the potential for divinity, not just a representation, but the actual presence of a god.

Elson and Smith use the Aztec New Fire Ceremony to explain how even everyday household objects held potential for godly essences. The New Fire Ceremony took place in the Aztec Empire every fifty-two years to mark the beginning of a new calendrical cycle (based on the convergence of the sacred ritual calendar and the secular calendar that only occurred every fifty-two years). It was a five-day ceremony of celebration because the world had not come to an end and renewal to begin the new cycle. In order to renew or cleanse the household people divested themselves of all their possessions so they could begin the new cycle fresh and without any remnants of the past; this included clothes, household deity statues, and cooking and storage vessels. When the New Fire Ceremony ended and the new cycle began, people replaced the

⁸¹ Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 124.

objects that had been dumped, usually in the water because all fires were put out for the duration of the five-day ceremony. Elson and Smith suggest, “that the Aztecs replaced some kinds of household objects because, as potential receptacles of ‘essences,’ these things no longer held desirable properties.”⁸² The destruction of household objects at the local level mirrors the state level destruction of any items touched by impersonators during religious ceremonies; anything that had the potential to hold the essence of a god had to be sacrificed and because people may have called upon the gods in their own homes any of their objects held that potential.

The importance of nature and sacred spaces in the Aztec world combined with the idea that divinity could extend beyond the gods and their images points to the possibility that the Aztecs saw their gods in the elements of nature such as water, trees, rocks, or the sun and made the appropriate accommodations to make offerings or sacrifices to them. In fact Townsend recounts the story of priests inaugurating a new aqueduct and “as the water rushed in they reached down to present incense, turquoise, and sacrificed quail to the life-giving element, and spoke to the water itself as the living object of the offering.”⁸³ This story shows how the entire Aztec world was touched by their beliefs and how they believed they could communicate with their gods in many different ways, which would be a difficult practice for the Spanish to overcome in their quest of conversion.

In addition to the objects that could be made sacred with the presence of divinity actual deity images were important to Aztec religion and state. In the Aztec Empire religion and politics were inextricably linked as evidenced by the custom of incorporating gods of conquered tribes

⁸² Elson et al., “Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony,” 157-159.

⁸³ Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 124. and Frances F. Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (San Bernardino: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 230.

into the Empire's pantheon. Stories and mythologies of conquered peoples blended into Aztec mythology and images of conquered deities were also overtaken by the Aztecs, so much so that "in Tenochtitlan, a special building in the great ceremonial precinct – the *coateocalli* – was assigned to house the captive religious paraphernalia and fetishes of conquered communities."⁸⁴ There were multiple reasons for this practice; the taking of a godly image was a symbolic representation of the capture of that god's city or community and in addition, "these captured sculptures signaled ... the Aztec acquisition of the cosmo-magical powers embedded in the statues."⁸⁵ The Aztec Empire gained symbolic power by defeating and possessing an enemy's god. The belief that each image held the essence of the god was more important than the symbolic power because possessing the image of the divine meant controlling the power exerted by those sacred objects. As the Empire expanded its territory and population through the inclusion of conquered people it concentrated its control with its possession of sacred images.

The importance of foreign deity images paled in comparison to the importance of the principal Aztec gods. As recounted in the creation stories and the Legend of the Five Suns the main gods of Aztec mythology were Quetzalcoatl, Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca, and Tlaloc. Although there were hundreds more deities that were worshipped among the Aztecs these were considered the most powerful and important to the empire as evidenced by the annual journey the ruler made to Mount Tlaloc to pray for rain to sustain the land, the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan, a great pyramid dedicated to both Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, and the speeches made to Tezcatlipoca by Aztec rulers before their coronation.⁸⁶ In addition to the building dedicated to images of foreign deities each deity of the Aztec pantheon had its own temple or

⁸⁴ Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 116.

⁸⁵ Carrasco, *Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*, 101.

⁸⁶ Townsend, *The Aztecs*.

shrine where the god's image and accoutrements were kept. There were priests and priestesses of all ages who maintained the temples "and their godly images and sacred paraphernalia: daily sweeping, decorating, fire maintenance, and the offering of incense, not to mention temple repair and the upgrading of images."⁸⁷ Because the images of the deity held the essence of the god they were treated with the utmost care and respect, as the god itself.

What Frances Berdan calls "sacred paraphernalia" was as important as the statues of the gods residing in Aztec temples because that paraphernalia, the garments and adornments specific to each deity, was what called the presence of the god into the object. Berdan notes that the statues of gods "were fashioned of stone, wood, or dough ... While their basic form was important, special adornments and accoutrements gave these images their personalities and powers."⁸⁸ The adornments could be clothing with godly symbols, flowers, jewels, gold, any number of things that were associated with the deities. When the images were removed from the temples for public celebrations and displays they were ornamented with their specific symbols which enabled the public to recognize them and call upon them.

Any study of Aztec religious practices is incomplete without the mention of ritual human sacrifice, a practice that revolted the Spanish and for many centuries fueled debates among researchers as to the purpose of the sacrifices and possible cannibalism.⁸⁹ Sacrifice is important

⁸⁷ Frances F. Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (San Bernardino: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 235.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 237.

⁸⁹ David Carrasco explains that there is little evidence to support the Spanish claims that up to 80,000 people were sacrificed by the Aztecs at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, but so far archaeological digs have produced only 126 bodies that were victims of sacrifice. Even if more bodies remain to be found they would likely not reach the number claimed by the Spanish chroniclers of the conquest. As for the practice of cannibalism he rejects the once proposed theory that Aztecs partook in cannibalism because they lacked other source of protein. This theory has been widely rejected and discredited by more in depth studies of the practice. David Carrasco, *Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011): 61-67. In addition, Barry Issac argues that cannibalism was a practice abhorred by the Aztecs under most circumstances and used only rarely and as a form of trickery for political reasons. He states that there is no evidence that cannibalism was an institutionalized practice in the

in the discussion of sacred objects because those objects acted as the means to deliver the nourishment from the sacrifice to the gods. To understand the motive behind the ritual sacrifice performed by the Aztecs it is necessary to go back to the creation story or the Five Suns. The Aztecs believed that they were living under the fifth sun and the way the gods created the fifth sun was by sacrificing themselves in fire. First *Nanautzin* threw himself into the fire to reemerge as the sun and the other gods of the story sacrificed themselves in the fire in order to keep the sun moving through the sky. Since their world was based on the self-sacrifice of the gods the Aztecs believed that they owed a debt to the gods who created them and had to nourish the gods in order to keep the world going. This debt was paid in blood and the ritual sacrifices were meant to recreate the sacrifice the gods made to create the world, therefore every sacrifice was a renewal of the lives of the gods and the earth. Interestingly, as Carrasco points out “the Aztecs, not having a word like ‘sacrifice,’ called the animals and humans who were ritually killed *nextlahualtin*, meaning payments or restitutions. These sacrificial entities were basically ‘payback’ – the prized gifts that would bring balance and renewal to the gods.”⁹⁰ The gods were offered foods and animal sacrifices, but the only thing that could truly sustain them and begin to repay the debt that humanity owed them was human blood. In order to capture the strongest, most suitable sacrifices that would sustain the gods the Aztecs carried out “flower wars” which were “staged by previous mutual agreement between opposing communities for the sole purpose

Empire and believes that reports of cannibalism at the time of conquest were either exaggerated or false, used as propaganda to support the brutal suppression of the Indians and justify the Spanish mission to convert them to Catholicism. Barry L. Isaac, “Aztec Cannibalism: Nahua versus Spanish and Mestizo Accounts in the Valley of Mexico,” *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 16 (2005): 1-10.

⁹⁰ Carrasco, *Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*, 69.

of capturing prisoners for sacrifice.”⁹¹ Warriors were the most desirable sacrifices because their strength would be transmitted to the gods upon their death.

Based on archaeological excavations and Bernal Díaz de Castillo’s claims of a ceremony he witnessed it is possible to know the importance of the sacred objects used in sacrifices. Once again the belief of the essence of the god residing within its image or other objects is central to the ritual performed; sacrifices were performed on special sacrificial alters in the presence of deity statues. Once the victim was killed his heart was offered to the statue, and by touching the two together the god could absorb the power it needed from the heart. Additionally, in excavations “traces on the surfaces of statues, alters, and floors of certain ritual chambers reveal that sacrificial blood was smeared on divine images and spilled in significant quantity.”⁹² The presence of gods in so many objects allowed the Aztecs to communicate with their deities and offer them direct contact to the sacrifices needed to sustain the world. The Aztecs did not practice human sacrifice because of vengeance or a need to prove their strength, they practiced it out of fear that without it their world would be destroyed. Some people, mostly priests, practiced auto-sacrifice in which they would pierce their own skin with sharp instruments in order to offer blood to the gods, sometimes before special ceremonies and sometimes daily.⁹³ That priests would willingly endure the pain of opening wounds on their own bodies shows how important it was to continue the cycle of sacrifice to keep the sun moving through the sky.

⁹¹ Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 208.

⁹² Carrasco, *Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*, 63.

⁹³ Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 174.

Maya Sacred Objects

Ceremonial objects among the Maya did not carry the same significance and presence as they did for the Aztecs. The central tenet of Maya belief was the veneration of and communication with ancestors, and the objects used for communication were not considered to hold the presence of the ancestors in the way that Aztec objects held the essence of a deity.⁹⁴ In his book *The Maya World of Communicating Objects* Miguel Angel Astor-Aguilera stresses the point that the Maya did not engage in ancestor worship, they did not raise their dead relatives to a godlike status, rather they venerated their ancestors and continued to care for them after death in order to form a reciprocal relationship in which the living and dead cared for each other.⁹⁵ The relationship between the living and their “non-living” ancestors was based on each one’s place in the cosmic world and the roll each one played in keeping the world in balance.⁹⁶ Linda Schele and David Freidel explain the cyclical nature of the relationship between the Maya and their ancestors:

The actions and interactions of Otherworld beings influenced the fate of this world, bringing disease or health, disaster or victory, life or death, prosperity or misfortune into the lives of human beings. But the denizens of the Otherworld were also dependent upon the deeds of the living for their continued well-being. Only the living could provide the nourishment required by both the inhabitants of the Otherworld and the souls who would be reborn there as ancestors.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Various authors stress the fact that not all people who died in the Maya world became ancestors. Ancestors were chosen by the living, and did not necessarily have to be related by blood to the living. Ancestors could be members of a socio or political alliance.

⁹⁵ Miguel Angel Astor-Aguilera, *The Maya World of Communicating Objects: Quadripartite Crosses, Trees, and Stones* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).

⁹⁶ Astor-Aguilera uses the term “non-living” to refer to Maya ancestors because the Maya believed that the ancestors’ spirits continued to live on in another world, the realm of spirits, gods, and ancestors.

⁹⁷ Linda Schele and David Freidel. *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 65.

Nourishment for the ancestors came in various forms: the burning of incense, offerings of food and drink or precious stones like jade, and most importantly blood. Blood offerings to Maya ancestors or deities did not come from the death of human sacrifices to the extent they did in the Aztec Empire; the individual caring for the ancestor or supplicating him would draw his own blood as an offering in an act of auto-sacrifice. Sometimes the sacrificial blood was applied directly to a communicating object, but mostly the blood from the auto-sacrifice was collected on a piece of paper and burned with incense and the smoke carried the offering to the ancestors.⁹⁸ The act of bloodletting was especially important when performed by kings because their blood opened the doorway to communication with the Otherworld through the mythological World Tree that had its roots in the Underworld and grew into the Living World. With the door open for communication, “Otherworld beings could be materialized in ritual objects, in features in the landscape, or in the actual body of a human performer.”⁹⁹ Maya rulers performed these bloodletting ceremonies in part to solidify their political power by associating themselves with the revered ancestors of their lineage by allowing the ancestors to pass through the portal and into the rulers performing the ritual. By performing this deed, the rulers of individual cities acted as head shamans for their people, ensuring that the royal ancestors were appeased and maintained the balance of the world.

It was important for rulers to associate themselves with the founders of their dynasty or their city in order to legitimize their rule and promote the idea of rule by divine right.¹⁰⁰ To this end rulers commissioned monuments to document their genealogy and history that often

⁹⁸ David L. Webster, “Maya Religion,” in *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Susan Toby Evans and David L. Webster (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 449.

⁹⁹ Schele et al., *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ William L. Fash, *Scribes, Warriors, and Kings: The City of Copán and the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).

portrayed a particular ancestor behind or above the image of the ruler as if sanctioning his rule.¹⁰¹ A common type of monument found in various Maya cities is the stela, a tall cylindrical slab of stone with carvings or reliefs all around. Stelae were used by rulers and members of the upper class to document their station within the social hierarchy, emphasize their connection to the king, and promote their esteemed position within the cosmic order; stelae served as historical records of a person's deed as well as a record of his genealogy, linking him with revered ancestors all to enhance his connection to the supernatural world and keep his memory alive for future generations. To strengthen their claim of rule by divine right Maya kings not only portrayed their link to the ancestors by depicting them on their stelae, but also with the gods themselves by showing the kings dressed in clothes with symbols associated with different gods, implying a godly connection with and support for the king.¹⁰² Another way Mayans used stelae to associate themselves with the past was to emulate the styles of carving found on older stelae as well as placement of the stelae near or facing older ones as a way of displaying continuity with the past. By placing new stelae in an area where the figures on older ones could "see" them the old figures essentially became witnesses to the actions portrayed on the new stelae, once again creating the idea of a hereditary sanction and placing the subject of the new stelae within the historical timeline of the older ones. Rulers could insert themselves both metaphorically and physically into the chronology of their dynasty and create a narrative that spanned generations.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Megan E. O'Neil, *Engaging Ancient Maya Sculpture at Piedras Negras, Guatemala* (Normal: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

¹⁰² Schele et al., *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, 209-211.

¹⁰³ O'Neil, *Engaging Ancient Maya Sculpture at Piedras Negras, Guatemala*, 115.

Stelae were not just historical records and monuments, they were also powerful communicating objects and acted as portals for ancestors to come through into the living world. The Maya believed that the stelae had potential to hold the essence of an ancestor and act as a communicating object, but there were ceremonies to be performed to imbue the monuments with “a vital essence. If the monument was of a ruler, the object might have been imbued with part of his soul...”¹⁰⁴ This belief in stelae containing essences of ancestors supported the idea that the proximity of older stelae to newer monuments allowed ancestors to witness and approve of the transfer of power from ruler to ruler. However, the ceremonial aspect of imbuing stelae with essences show that not all stelae or monuments were considered to contain a spirit, only those which were known to have been activated, but that did not diminish the symbolic importance the monuments held among the Maya. Schele and Freidel recount the extensive rituals one Maya ruler went through to restore honor to his ancestors after two stelae were desecrated during the conquest and occupation of his burial city. Inscriptions on altars at the city of Caracol detail the wars that the city engaged in to defeat its enemies of other cities in the region such as Naranjo and Tikal. The altar at Caracol boasts of defeating Tikal in the year 562, and this is substantiated by the lack of new monumental building in Tikal dating from the time of its defeat until 692. The ruler who brought Tikal out of the dominion of Caracol was *Ah-Cacaw*. In 682 he began his reign by trying to restore monuments that were destroyed or desecrated during Caracol’s conquest of the city. *Ah-Cacaw* understood the symbolic and ritual importance of buildings and monuments, so his “first major political act was to honorably bury two of the desecrated stelae that had been left as trash in the Great Plaza by the victorious Caracol ahauob.”¹⁰⁵ The plans to bury the stelae were filled with ceremony and ritual, not just recognizing the power of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 61.

¹⁰⁵ Schele et al., *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, 197.

monuments, but symbolism behind the chosen place of burial. *Ah-Cacaw* chose to bury the stelae in the great temple he commissioned above the tomb of his father. By placing the broken stelae in the same temples in which his ancestors lay *Ah-Cacaw* sought to “link the two ritual burials so that his ancestral dead would understand his motivation.”¹⁰⁶ The ceremonies performed to bury the stelae were meant to restore honor to the ancestral lineage at Tikal and connect the city’s newest ruler to the past so he could call upon the restored ancestors for help in finally overthrowing the enemy of Caracol.

In their description of the burial of the stelae Schele and Freidel point out that every broken shard from the stelae was reverently retrieved and placed in the ceremonial pits along with what was left intact of the monument. Schele and Freidel offer a vivid image of what the ceremony entailed, from burning copal incense, to bloodletting, it seemed to be an extensive ritual that involved many people and much time. It was not until after these ceremonies were performed that *Ah-Cacaw* went to war against, and ultimately overthrew the ruler ship of Caracol. The need to restore honor to his ancestors was more than symbolic for *Ah-Cacaw*, without their restoration the ancestors could not support him and guide him in his fight, and without that support conditions for war were unfavorable and could have doomed his mission from the start; however, with the ancestors restored *Ah-Cacaw* could call upon them to intervene in his favor and help him defeat his enemy.

The story of *Ah-Cacaw* represents various aspects of Maya belief: the importance of maintaining a connection with the past, the power imbued in certain monuments, and the importance of honoring the ancestors and obtaining their sanction for major events. All of these

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 200.

beliefs led to the common practice among Maya rulers of building new structures on top of older temples or monuments in order to harness their power, as seen by *Ah-Cacaw* choosing to build his new temple on top of the one where his father was buried. Not only was the physical body of an ancestor considered a powerful communicating object, but the more a sacred object was used the more powerful it became, thus building temples on temples and using older stelae was meant to give the ruler using them more power and a deeper connection to the past.¹⁰⁷ This custom also made these monuments targets of rivals, as evidenced by the destruction Caracol inflicted on Tikal. It is an easier task to destroy a monument to rid it of its power than it is to perform extensive ceremonies to restore its power, so when Caracol destroyed or damaged temples or stelae they were destroying Tikal's power.¹⁰⁸

Monumental architecture was important for the rulers and nobility of different Mayan cities, but the lower classes also had their ways to communicate with ancestors that perhaps did not rival the monuments and temples built by rulers, but still held the same meaning and importance in their lives. As already shown Maya believed their ancestors could intercede in the Otherworld on behalf of their living descendants, but it was a reciprocal relationship in which the living provided nourishment for the dead. In order to maintain this relationship with the ancestors many Maya buried their dead under the ground of their homes, or close around the perimeter of the home. Many Maya also created household shrines to their ancestors within the home because in keeping the physical remains of the deceased relative close it was easier to feed or nourish the ancestors and communicate with them. An important archaeological find regarding Maya burial practices is the evidence that tomb re-entry was a common practice

¹⁰⁷ Schele et al., *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, 72.

¹⁰⁸ O'Neil, *Engaging Ancient Maya Sculpture at Piedras Negras, Guatemala*, 182.

among both elite and non-elite Maya.¹⁰⁹ Aguilar describes it as “rampant disrespect and sacrilegious behavior,”¹¹⁰ but it seems a logical practice for people who believed ancestral remains held power and acted as a means to communicate with the Otherworld. It was not disrespectful to disturb a burial because it was most likely done with a sacred or ritual purpose, such as feeding or communicating with ancestors.

Another possible reason for the commonality of tomb re-entry among the Maya was the creation of sacred bundles. Sacred bundles were bundles of objects bound together with a special cloth and were then placed either in a shrine to an ancestor or in his burial. These bundles included offerings to ancestors like stones, ceramics, or gems. Sometimes these bundles contained a bone, or multiple bones, of an ancestor; in that case the bundle served less as an offering and more as a protection as “the Classic Maya ... also carried ancestor bundles with them against their enemies. The Classic Maya could also have used these bundles in migrations and pilgrimages.”¹¹¹ Because many different types of bundles have been found at archaeological excavations in different situations it is not entirely possible to point to one specific use of these bundles, but different types of bundles could have been used in different situations. David Stuart explains the variety of uses for bundling objects, but he explains that cloth bundles like the ones described above “were considered sacred objects and contained items of great spiritual power, such as maize cobs, divining stones, sacrificial instruments, or deity images. Wrapping venerated things in cloth served to protect them from the elements and from everyday sights, and to ensure that the items retained their ‘heat’ and spiritual essence.”¹¹² Different types of bundles were used

¹⁰⁹ Astor-Aguilera, *The Maya World of Communicating Objects*, 33-35.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

¹¹¹ James L. Fitzsimmons, *Death and the Classic Maya Kings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) 80.

¹¹² David Stuart, “Bundles,” in *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Susan Toby Evans and David L. Webster (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 86.

for different purposes, but the common element in them all was the sacredness of the items within, and they all had to be protected to guard the spirits attached to them.

In addition to ancestor veneration the Maya people also worshipped various deities in manners similar to those of the Aztecs. As shown by the practice of communicating with ancestors there was little to no separation between the living world and the Otherworld of the Maya. This lack of separation also meant a fluid relationship between the secular and sacred. Maya people called upon their ancestors for personal reasons in hopes that the spirits would intervene on their behalf in the Otherworld, but gods moved the world and influenced the forces of nature, so they too had to be appeased and honored. John F. Chuchiak IV describes the importance of effigy censers in pre-Hispanic and Colonial Mexico; effigy censers were clay pots that were used to burn incense and offerings to the gods, but each censer was made with the image of the deity to whom the offering was being made “so that the spirit or deity would come into and inhabit the idol.”¹¹³ When a deity was called into an item there was no separation between the image and the deity, they became the same thing, so by placing the image onto a ceremonial pot used for offerings the Maya were placing the offerings not in a regular bowl or pot, they were giving them to the god directly because it inhabited the censer. The making of an effigy censer, or other god images, was its own ritual and ceremony as only certain craftsmen could produce god images and the ceremony was distinct for the specific god being formed and the material used. Images made of certain materials could only be produced during specific months in the Mayan calendar and the craftsmen and priests involved in the production fasted for

¹¹³ John F. Chuchiak IV, “*De Descriptio Idolorum: An Ethnohistorical Examination of the Production, Imagery, and Functions of Colonial Yucatec Maya Idols and Effigy Censers, 1540-1700,*” in *Mesoamerican Worlds: Maya Worldviews at Conquest*, eds. Leslie G. Cecil and Timothy W. Pugh (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009), 137.

a period of time before the carving began. For all types of god images, the craftsmen “worked within a sacred ritual space that was bounded on the four cardinal directions by stone images of the gods called Acantunes. The four Acantunes served as the spiritual guardians of the Maya idol makers during the long and dangerous process of making gods.”¹¹⁴ All ceremonies involved a bloodletting ritual by the craftsman to give life to the gods and priests were required to invoke the god to reside within the image.¹¹⁵

Anyone who could pay the fee could commission a god image for himself and the most common types of god images recorded in colonial documents were those made of clay. Adding to the ceremony and ritual behind these images was the material itself as “the clay used to fashion these god images often came from sacred places such as the cave at Loltun ... the sacredness of the clay involved in the making of idols was also evidenced by the Maya’s desire to make new god images out of the ashes and dust of older ones. Clay idol makers attempted to use ground powders of older god images in the fashioning of their new clay creations.”¹¹⁶ This practice is similar to that of building temples on top of temples to harness the power of the older site; using dust from previous clay images made the newly fashioned ones more powerful as they were imbued with the essence of the first image as well as its own power.

Just as with the ancestors the relationship between people and the gods was a reciprocal one; people made offerings to the gods to petition them for good health, fertility, good fortune with crops and hunting, and other things that affected their general well-being. In return people nourished the gods through their images and sacred spaces. However, because it was a reciprocal

¹¹⁴ Chuchiak IV, “*De Descriptio Idolorum*,” 150.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

relationship when the gods did not provide, neither did the people, “in some cases, the Maya even destroyed their god’s image if he/she failed to grant a petition that was presented correctly.”¹¹⁷ The Maya believed that if they carried out the necessary rituals and took proper care of the gods their requests would be granted. In addition to nourishing the gods with sacrifices and other offerings the people took great care to protect the god images, especially after all the work that went in to creating them; personal images were kept in the home, in “secret *templos o adoratorios* ... the Maya also kept other god images in scared places like underground *cenotes* (caves) or even ensconced deep within the forest ... or in cornfields (milpas).”¹¹⁸ The trouble that people went to in order to protect their god images shows the deep seeded belief that the images were not mere representations of gods, but contained the essence of the gods themselves.

Inca Sacred Objects

When Francisco Pizarro captured the Inca ruler *Atahualpa* he demanded a ransom of gold and treasure from the Inca nobility in order to secure the leader’s release; when the nobility provided the ransom the gold and silver was melted down and sent back to Spain, destroying many Incan statues and sacred objects. Fortunately, the Incan practice of creating mountain top shrines and burials preserved some artifacts to provide a glimpse into Incan religious practices. Constanza Ceruti describes such mountain top burials and four separate mummies and funerary bundles found at four different ceremonial sites high in the Andes Mountains. These sites were protected from Spanish pillaging and destruction because their high altitude and out of the way location hid them from the invaders. The four mummies found in the mountains were sacrifices

¹¹⁷ Chuchiak IV, “*De Descriptio Idolorum*,” 139.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

“to the Sun god Inti, to the Weather (Thunder) deity Illapa and to the Creator Viracocha.”¹¹⁹

Ceruti compared ethno-historical records and the sites where the mummies were found to conclude that three of the four sacrificial victims were part of separate *capacocha* ceremonies. The Inca performed these ceremonies for a variety of reasons: an important event in the Inca Emperor’s life, to stop the occurrence of natural disasters, or at set intervals to preemptively appease the gods in control of the weather.¹²⁰ There were also political motivations behind sacrifices to keep different regions of the empire under control, but the main reason the Inca sacrificed people, usually children, was as offerings to the Sun god. The sacrifices acted as representatives and messengers of their communities before the gods, bringing with them all the offerings from their people. The grave goods found in Inca sacrifices were as important as the sacrifices themselves; the *capacocha* victims were all buried with similar bundles containing spare textiles like tunics, mantles, sandals, and bags as well as food, pottery, and gold and silver figurines. The figurines could be male or female, and sometimes were representations of animals, commonly llamas, and they were adorned with clothes and headdresses similar to those of the victim with which they were buried. Ceruti notes the specific placement of items in relation to the body, suggesting that each item had its own ritual purpose in the burial, although they are not entirely clear, but they could have been meant to nourish the children in the afterlife or serve as offerings to the spirits of the mountains. The figurines may have represented specific deities, but without records or firsthand descriptions of the ceremonies, it is difficult to assert their purpose. An important distinction between Inca and Mesoamerican sacrificial customs is that the Aztecs

¹¹⁹ Constanza Ceruti, “Human Bodies as Objects of Dedication at Inca Mountain Shrines (North-West Argentina),” *World Archeology* 36 No. 1 (March 2004): 114.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

and Maya were content to offer blood to the gods, but the Inca preferred to sacrifice the entire body because blood only was an incomplete offering and not worthy of the Sun god.¹²¹

Like the Maya, the Inca venerated their ancestors and had a reciprocal relationship with them through the permeable separation of the living and the dead. Just as in Maya society, the Inca chose which ancestors to honor based on the power and importance they had during their life. Once an ancestor was deceased, he held great influence over the world of the living and needed nourishment and care from his descendants in the living world in order to intercede positively on their behalf. Like the sacrifices to the gods, the bodies of ancestors were mummified and preserved, but not as offerings; higher-ranking officials were mummified upon death so they could maintain their place in society and continue to function as they had in life. Members of the lower ranks did not merit the same ritual as the nobility, but they still honored their ancestors by drying the body and placing it in a “cave or a small, specially constructed house (chullpa) with an open door and free access that permitted visits by living relatives.”¹²² Having access to an ancestral mummy was key to preserving the relationship between the living and the dead and allowed the living the contact they needed to feed and care for the ancestor. In Egypt mummies were embalmed, preserved for their rebirth in the afterlife, and sealed away for centuries, the Inca people believed the spirits of the ancestors inhabited their mummies and to seal them away would disrupt the cycle of care and guardianship that the living and dead performed for each other. Royal mummies were treated especially well and occupied the same station that they did in life; Gordon McEwan describes how royal mummies were “dressed in fine clothing and installed in the palace it had occupied in life. It was in fact treated as if still

¹²¹ Ceruti, “Human Bodies as Objects of Dedication,” 116.

¹²² Gordon F. McEwan, *The Incas: New Perspectives*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 140.

alive. Mummies of dead Inca rulers continued to own all of the property and estates they possessed in life. They were fed each day as if alive and provided with drink and entertainment. Mummies attended all important state ceremonies, visited and entertained relatives and friends, and were believed to enjoy the best things as in life.”¹²³ McEwan does not expand on why royal mummies were displayed in this manner, but he does note that because the mummies owned their property from life new rulers did not inherit the wealth accumulated by their predecessors. Perhaps displaying and caring for a royal mummy was a way for new rulers to assert their power by showing a connection with a powerful ancestor and harnessing the power of the ancestor to increase their own.

Huaca is a term that encompasses a variety of things in the Inca world; it referred to sacred spaces like mountains, it referred to the revered ancestor mummies, it referred to any object that the Inca considered sacred or that possessed sacred powers. Claudia Brosseder explores the concept of representation versus embodiment in Andean objects, a key challenge the Spanish faced in their attempts to convert the Andean people to Catholicism. She explains that the Inca believed that supernatural spirits resided within their *huacas* and had powers of transformation, both of themselves and of others.¹²⁴ Because the Inca Empire covered a large geographic area and brought many different conquered tribes under its rule the Empire faced the challenge of dealing with local *huacas*, embodied by different spirits. The Inca dealt with the *huacas* of conquered peoples in different ways depending on what advantage or disadvantage they saw in the continued existence of the *huacas*. The ruling class of Incas believed in the power of *huacas* and understood the need to tread carefully when engaging with those of another

¹²³ McEwan, *The Incas*, 140-141.

¹²⁴ Brosseder, “Cultural Dialogue and Its Premises in Colonial Peru,” 383-414.

tribe; they needed to maintain a balance of control over conquered tribes by honoring some *huacas* so there would not be a revolt and destroying others that were dangerous to the empire.

Brosseder explains the different ways the Inca dealt with foreign *huacas*:

in some cases, Inca religious expansionism and universalism manifested itself in the capture and removal of local ‘idols,’ which were reinstalled in Cuzco to make their new subjects turn their attention to the Inca capital. These *huacas* were then displayed in the Qoricancha ... In other instances, Inca expansionism resulted in the destruction of idols ... the Incas annihilated hostile *huacas* whose subjects resisted most vigorously. In other instances, however, Incas exhibited deference toward local *huacas*.¹²⁵

The capture of local *huacas* and their subsequent installation in the main temple in Cuzco was a way to incorporate conquered tribes into the empire by honoring their deities, but it was also a way to hold their *huacas* hostage, essentially threatening their well-being if the tribes did not cooperate. Possession equated to power, so possessing *huacas* meant possessing their power.

Similar to the Maya the Inca believed that the more something was used the more powerful it became; however, the Inca concept was different in that the more a *huaca* transformed itself or another object the more powerful it became. When a *huaca* transformed itself or another being it usually transformed any negative powers into positive ones, and as objects transformed they held on to a variety of forces, giving them more power.¹²⁶ Because *huacas* could transfer their essences into new objects and gather powers along the way *huacas* that were older were venerated and “religious specialists worshipped even the tiniest pieces of destroyed guacas ... religious specialists recovered ashes of burned idols.”¹²⁷ An example of *huaca* transformation is the story of a mythical battle between two powerful *huacas*, at one point one *huaca* unleashed a giant snake and his enemy quickly petrified the creature. After the battle

¹²⁵ Claudia Brosseder, *The Power of Huacas: Change and Resistance in the Andean World of Colonial Peru*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 72.

¹²⁶ Brosseder, “Cultural Dialogue and Its Premises in Colonial Peru,” 404.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 397.

the petrified snake transformed “into a vein of lead in a rock; people from near and far would chop off pieces of it, as it was rumored to possess healing properties.”¹²⁸ The snake was an object of evil, meant to defeat an enemy in battle, but when it was transformed by a powerful *huaca* it became an object of good and healing. Such was the power that *huacas* held over the Inca people; they could be small stones, deity statues, mummies, geological features or anomalies, but as long as they were recognized and honored they were powerful mystical tools that the Inca used to navigate their world.

When the Spanish encountered indigenous ritual practices, they saw people who were fooled for centuries into believing their gods inhabited objects, when in the Spanish view the Catholic Devil was speaking through those idols. The Spanish called the indigenous sacred objects “idols” because they saw the Indians worshipping statues and objects as gods, placing pagan figures above the true Catholic god. At first, the indigenous transgressions were forgivable, they were poor souls who were uneducated in Catholicism and did not know that the Devil was tricking them into worshipping him, but as time and conversion efforts progressed the Spanish had less tolerance for indications that the Indians continued their old practices. The problem facing the Spanish in their quest to eradicate idolatry was their arrogance in thinking they could force millions of people to abandon the way of life they had known for countless generations without understanding what they were trying to eradicate. For the Indians the crusade against idolatry was a crusade against their history and their connections with the past ensured their futures, so it was more than the loss of some statues. Also, the Indians saw the Spanish practicing what seemed to be the same type of idol worship with their images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, so they questioned why their sacred objects were blasphemous,

¹²⁸ Brosseder, “Cultural Dialogue and Its Premises in Colonial Peru,” 402.

but the Spanish images were not. What Brosseder calls “embodiment” versus “representation” was a difficult concept for the Indians to let go of; they knew their statues, monuments, mummies, or *huacas* held the essence of the spirits called into them, so they did not comprehend how Catholic images only represented a spirit.

Saint worship was the easiest way for indigenous peoples to continue some of their old rituals under the thumb of Catholicism because saints, ancestors, and deities served similar functions within their respective cultures. Additionally, indigenous groups all had their own ritual calendar based on agricultural and astrological cycles which demanded certain ceremonies be performed at certain times of the year. These often coincided with Catholic saints’ feast days or other important Catholic dates. It is more than coincidence that indigenous and Catholic festivals overlapped; both calendars were filled with important dates and rituals, so it would be anomalous if they did not share common festival days. This allowed indigenous people to continue their ceremonial practices under the guise of Catholicism and saint worship. The Spanish initially celebrated the indigenous practice of saint worship because they believed it showed their devotion to their new faith. However, the indigenous practice of saint worship eventually came under suspicion, “and the association of idols and saints was still so strong in the seventeenth century that the worship of Catholic saints was called idolatry by Jacinto de la Serna, who observed that some Indians thought the saints were gods.”¹²⁹ This belief of saints as gods does not show a defiance or resistance of Catholicism, it shows an indigenous interpretation of a Catholic practice that was informed by their traditional worldview.

¹²⁹ Markman et al., *Masks of the Spirit*, 159.

Chapter 3: The Problem of Language

Friars and priests followed close on the heels of the conquistadors ready to undertake their own conquest of indigenous souls. The Spanish encountered long established religious myths and ceremonies among the Indigenous peoples, but this was only one challenge they faced in the attempt to convert them to Christianity. Language triggered a gap in communication that widened when it involved the issue of religion. Many conquistadors used native interpreters in their journeys, most famous is La Malinche used by Cortes, but the language barrier extended to the friars and missionaries trying to communicate the intricacies of Catholicism. This chapter will focus on how language influenced native understanding of the new religion they were forced to adopt.

Stories of the conquest describe encounters between great men of two different worlds meeting and communicating, but rarely focus on how that communication was achieved. In Mexico, Hernán Cortés used a set of interpreters to speak with Aztec emperor Mocteczuma; La Malinche, the native woman who spoke Nahuatl and Maya translated with Fray Gerónimo de Aguilar who spoke Maya and Castilian (Spanish). In the Andes Francisco Pizarro used a native boy, Felipillo, who was captured, taken to Spain to learn Castilian, and returned to South America on a subsequent voyage to serve as interpreter. While these interpreters translated words for two cultures there were more factors to communication than just words. Assuming the interpreters accurately translated the words between men the intended messages were not always clearly communicated. The Spanish and Indigenous cultures each had their own rhetorical styles and connotations associated with tone of voice, style of speech, and body language. Since the interpreters were always foreign to one of the cultures those subtleties could not always be translated.

There are varying accounts of the origin of La Malinche, called Malatzin in the Aztec language of Nahuatl, but it seems most likely that she was an Aztec girl sold into slavery to the Tabascans, a tribe who spoke Maya. Being of Aztec origin Malatzin spoke Nahuatl and learned to speak Maya during her time in captivity. Her bilingualism was an asset to Cortés who traveled with Fray Gerónimo de Aguilar who spoke Spanish and Maya from being shipwrecked in the Yucatan for years. Cortés spoke to Aguilar in Spanish who translated into Maya for Malinche who then relayed the message in Nahuatl to the Indian communities. The chain was then reversed for the natives to speak to Cortés. Like the modern game of telephone, the more people involved in the chain the greater the opportunity for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The “pivot language” was Maya, a second language for both translators, meaning the communication between conquistador and indigenous leader depended on two people using a third language of which they may or may not have known the intricacies and words for issues of diplomacy. There is no way to know if Cortés, Aguilar, and Malinche conference before meetings with native leaders to script a speech and pre-translate it; it is plausible that there was a pre-conceived speech recited at every encounter, however, the interpreters had to use spontaneous speech during a dialogue. What happened when either translator did not know a word in Maya? Did they exchange the unknown word for a different one, and did that change the meaning of the original statement? How did Malinche and Aguilar instantly account for a lack of words, and what new meaning was created?

Eventually Malinche learned Spanish and eliminated the need for Aguilar, becoming Cortés’ principle interpreter. Bernal Díaz de Castillo describes her skill in imitating Cortés’ tone and character of speech, such as when, “Cortés told them many threats and our lengua Doña

Marina knew how to make it understandable.”¹³⁰ That making threats understandable was a laudable act for La Malinche to perform means that words alone were not enough to convey meaning. Malinche had to know or learn nonverbal clues from two cultures to successfully translate and convey different attitudes of the speaker. Todorov examines the importance of Malinche’s understanding of cultural norms as a factor in the conquest of America. He argues that Malinche must have held some resentment toward her own people because of being sold into slavery and that was a probable reason she “adopts the Spaniards’ values and contributes as best she can to the achievement of their goals.”¹³¹ Whatever her reasons Malinche became more than a slave and interpreter to Cortés and the Spanish; she became an ally and provided a valuable cultural understanding of the Indians that enabled the Spanish to understand their actions and manipulate their responses to the Indians.

Perhaps the best example of the Spanish using their cultural understanding of the Indians for their profit is the legend of *Quetzalcoatl*. This legend is a complex one as it blends the god from the Aztec creation story and a historic hero of the same name; the two beings are one in this legend, both historical figure and deity. The legend tells of the benevolent ruler *Quetzalcoatl* who was betrayed by his allies and given *pulque*, a strong alcoholic beverage, so that he would commit acts of public drunkenness and dishonor himself. He left in disgrace, fleeing to the east, but vowed to return one day to reclaim his kingdom.¹³² In the legend *Quetzalcoatl* is described as a tall, white, bearded man; this description, along with the fact that Cortés and his army came to

¹³⁰ Victoria Ríos Castaño, “Fictionalising Interpreters: Traitors, Lovers and Liars in the Conquest of America,” *Linguística Anterpiensa, New Series- Themes in Translation Studies*, 4 (2005): 52.

¹³¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 100.

¹³² Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World*, (Boston: First Mariner Books, 1999), 109-110.

Mexico from the east were facts that were easily manipulated to foster the belief that the Spanish conquistador was the mythical hero returned to claim his rightful place as ruler. Recent scholars argue that the Cortés as *Quetzalcoatl* myth was one invented by the Spanish because accounts of it only appear in Spanish narratives; whether or not it was created by the Spanish it shows a shrewd ability to manipulate the culture of the Indians against them. Cortés describes his use of the myth in a letter to Charles V, the King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, in which he recounts the meeting between himself and Moctezuma who addressed him as the legendary ruler. Rather than dispel the myth Cortés explains to Charles V that he replied, “as I thought most fitting, especially in making him believe that Your Majesty was he whom they were expecting.”¹³³ Rather than discount the myth Cortés uses it to his advantage, something only possible with an understanding of what the legend of Quetzalcoatl means within Aztec culture. La Malinche was a key figure in providing this cultural context for Cortés, a benefit the Indians did not have as they had no knowledge of the Spanish, and no interpreter familiar with Spanish culture to give it to them.

In Peru Francisco Pizarro also used a native as his interpreter. Captured as a boy, Felipillo was sent to Spain to learn Castilian for the purpose of becoming an interpreter. While accounts of Malinche portray a trustworthy and faithful interpreter stories of Felipillo depict a shrewd and cunning politician, using his role of interpreter to further his own personal causes. Legend states that Felipillo was in love with one of the Inca Emperor Atahualpa’s wives, but could not act on it. In order to dispose of Atahualpa Felipillo purposefully misconstrued Pizarro’s speech, causing Atahualpa to throw the Bible to the ground, greatly insulting the Spanish. Pedro Cieza de Leon, a Spaniard who chronicled Incan history at the time of the

¹³³Letter from Cortés to Emperor Charles V as quoted in Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Conquest of America*, 118.

conquest, also maintained that Felipillo spread rumors among the Spanish that the Indians were organizing and arming themselves to attack the Spanish. This rumor caused the Spanish to take preemptive action and massacre the Indians at Cajamarca and capture Atahualpa.¹³⁴ Interestingly another Inca historian, Garcilaso de la Vega, took a different position about Felipillo believing that his misinterpretation during the episode with Atahualpa and the Bible was not purposeful, but rather that “Felipillo ‘often reversed the sense, but this was not done out of malice, but because he did not understand what he was interpreting and spoke it like a parrot. Instead of God three in one, he said God three and other make four.’”¹³⁵ If Felipillo intentionally tricked Atahualpa into dishonoring the Bible and insulting the Spanish or if he simply did not understand the importance of the book both scenarios highlight the importance of cultural understanding. If his intention was to make Atahualpa offend the Spanish Felipillo had the cultural knowledge to understand the importance of the Bible as a holy book to the Spanish and he knew exactly what to say in Quechua to Atahualpa to make him take such an odious action as throwing it down to the ground. If Felipillo simply misunderstood what he was translating then his lack of cultural understanding of Spanish religious practices prevented him from properly conveying the importance of the Bible to Atahualpa, who then threw the book to the ground not knowing its significance. In either case it is the cultural meaning behind objects and words that impact the outcome of the meeting; in one case it is used as a tool of manipulation and in the other the lack of cultural understanding causes conflict between the two parties.

¹³⁴ Ríos Castaño, Victoria, “Fictionalising Interpreters,” 56.

¹³⁵ El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru. Part Two*, trans. H.V. Livermore (Austin/London: University of Texas Press), 682 as quoted in Ríos Castaño, Victoria, “Fictionalising Interpreters,” 56.

Whether or not Felipillo actually plotted the demise of Atahualpa or caused the ambush at Cajamarca can never be known, but the idea that he orchestrated these events and the fact that the speculation continues today shows the power that the interpreters had. Early in the conquest when there were few people knowledgeable of indigenous languages none of the Spanish could verify what was said to the Indians. They also had no choice but to believe what was conveyed to them through the interpreter. For the amount of power and faith entrusted to them, interpreters have remained mostly silent in the history of the conquest.

In addition to a general cultural understanding necessary to interpret certain interactions between two worlds such as tone of voice, rhetorical styles, and historical context of events there was the problem of finding the appropriate words to explain foreign concepts for which such words did not exist. Todorov offers an example of this problem in his examination of Christopher Columbus' attempts at communication. He argues that Columbus had no interest in languages and looked for equivalencies between Spanish and Indian words without understanding the meaning of new words within Indian society. He gives the example that "the Admiral had not been able to understand if this word (cacique) signified king or governor."¹³⁶ Creating an equivalency of these words does not create an equivalency of meaning. Cacique and governor are both positions of power in some sort of hierarchy, but that simplification ignores the different cultural structures surrounding each position. Were the responsibilities associated with each title the same, did the cacique and governor rule over the comparable constituencies? The two words cannot be deemed equal until there is an examination of the different cultures and each word's place within their respective cultures. Because of the importance he placed on word equivalencies "Columbus does not succeed in his human communications because he is not

¹³⁶ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 29.

interested in them.”¹³⁷ The problem of word equivalencies was one that defined the early conquest and conversion of the Indians.

The problem the Spanish faced when converting the Indians was the lack of word equivalencies for the abstract concepts of religion. First and foremost, did the Indians have a word “religion”? Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo examines the idea of “religion” as a word in Mesoamerican languages; he looks not at the cultural charge behind the word, but the development of the actual word in different indigenous Mexican languages. Pharo scrutinizes the works of what he calls ethnographer-missionaries, those missionaries who created hundreds of dictionaries, grammar books, and records of traditions of the indigenous peoples. Dictionaries that contain Spanish to native and native to Spanish sections are better resources for exploring the concept of religion because they show if the word “religion” existed before the introduction of the concept by the Spanish. In most cases Pharo finds that no equivalent to the Spanish “religión” existed before the arrival of the Spanish; instead, missionaries cobbled together words in indigenous languages that they associated with the characteristics of religion, more specifically, Christianity. Using the work of Fray Francisco de Alvarado and Fray Antonio de los Reyes to look at the Mixtec language Pharo identifies “‘Religion’ or **sacaa sanuhu, sayyo sanuhu, sasica, huaha** can therefore be translated into English as ‘where there is a divine quality, a good(?) divine quality.’”¹³⁸ In this case religion is equal to divinity and goodness.

The Nahuatl term for religion comes from the work of Fray Alonso de Molina who “translates the Spanish term ‘religión’ with the Nahuatl word **Teoyotica Nemiliztli**.”¹³⁹ Using

¹³⁷ Ibid, 33.

¹³⁸ Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo, “The Concept of ‘Religion’ in Mesoamerican Languages,” *Numen* 54 (2007): 38.

¹³⁹ Pharo, “The Concept of ‘Religion’ in Mesoamerican Languages,” 41.

Molina's work and that of French lexicographer Rémi Siméon, Pharo concludes that "**Teoyotica Nemiliztli** thus denotes that an individual is leading a religious, i.e. a spiritual or divine pure life."¹⁴⁰ Pharo continues his work with other Mexican languages and the results are constant: to create a word to mean "religion" the Spanish combined indigenous words associated with purity, goodness, and divinity.

Pharo conducted the same type of research with various Maya languages as well, and the results were along the same lines, with some interesting differences. The Aztec words used for religion were associated with divinity and spirituality, but the study of two Maya languages reveals that "religion" was equated with more specific actions rather than ideas. In Yucatec Mayan there are two phrases given as definitions for religion: "**Ocol kuu** is rendered as 'chastity and abstinence' and **Okol k'u** as 'to demonstrate grief' or 'to wear clothes of grief.' Thus (**Ah**) **Okol k'u** signifies 'chaste, pure, abstinent, penitent, hermit.'¹⁴¹ These are observable actions that represent a religious life, a moral life, so in this case religion is defined by specific actions. The other Mayan language explored is Tzotzil, and the words given for religion are **Ch'uul xanbal** and **Utz Xanbal**. Once again Pharo breaks down each word to its components and finds "**Ch'uul** is Tzotzil for 'sacred, spiritual'; **Xan** means 'to go,' 'to travel'; while **Utz** can be rendered as 'correct, good, sacred, faithful.'... (**Ch'uul**) **Utz Xanbal** can accordingly be said to convey a (sacred) righteous, correct way of life, metaphors for 'belief, practices, and sacraments.'¹⁴² Again the Maya definition of religion focuses on maintaining a moral way of life, rather than placing focus on divinity. Pharo's in depth analysis of the various indigenous

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 42

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 44

¹⁴² Ibid, 45

words used to define one word, religion, show that the concept of religion was a Spanish idea introduced to the Indians.

Why did none of the indigenous groups have a word for religion when it was so prevalent in their cultures? I believe it is because their beliefs manifested themselves in everyday life rather than an organized set of ceremonial rites. There were specific ceremonies and there were priests, but unlike Christians the Indians did not go to a church to hear a sermon; every person interacted with their deities every day. For the Indians the entire world surrounding them was a divine supernatural force to be worshipped; they interacted with the Earth and elements every day and created a conversation with their gods. The gods communicated with the people by sending signs such as the weather or omens as warnings of danger to come. A dry harvest season that killed crops meant that the rain god was unhappy and must be appeased somehow, and just as the Aztec gods sacrificed themselves to keep the sun moving across the sky the earth demanded the same of the Aztec people who spilled sacrificial blood to keep the world moving.

Finding an equivalent for the word “religion” in indigenous languages was far from the greatest language challenge facing missionaries in converting the Indians. One of the first examples of an official attempt to convert the Indians is the 1513 edict called the *Requerimiento*, or Requirement, that conquistadors read to the Indians, in Spanish, before attacking them. Matthew Restall succinctly explains the contents of the edict that “informed natives of a sort of chain of command from God to pope to king to conquistadors, with the latter putting into effect the divinely sanctioned donation of all American lands and peoples by the pope to the Spanish monarch.”¹⁴³ Basically the conquistadors told the Indians to recognize the authority of the

¹⁴³ Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87.

Christian God and his messengers in the pope, king, and conquistadors; if they obeyed they would not be attacked, but if they resisted they would be attacked or killed and their property taken. This message was delivered to the Indians in Spanish, without the help of interpreters, and there is no evidence of it ever being translated into any indigenous language. Bartolomé de las Casas eventually pointed out the absurdity of the *Requerimiento*, but it shows two things about the Spanish during the conquest; an ethnocentric view of the world where they believed in their superiority over the Indians even in language, and true motivation of the soldiers on the ground: money. The lack of attempts to convey the *Requerimiento* in a language other than Castilian, knowing the Indians would not understand its meaning shows that despite the monarchy's goal of Catholicizing the Indians the men who made the journey to the colonies just wanted was a reason, however flimsy, to attack and plunder for their own profit.

Once the conquistadors subdued the Indians, friars from all different sects of Christianity went to the new world to begin the work of conversion; they immediately recognized the challenge of the language barrier and set out to fix it. The difference between the Castilian language and the native languages was not the first problem to address; the first problem was which native language to use. Each group examined here, the Maya, Aztec, and Inca of course had a language different from the others, but those are not the native languages to which I refer. The Aztec empire was comprised of different conquered tribes and cities, many of whom did not speak the official language of the empire. Nahuatl was the official language of the empire and was used for trade, literature, and official business, but people not involved in those affairs did not speak it. Within each empire there were at least dozens of different languages spoken, not simply dialects, different versions of the same language, but completely different languages. So the options for the friars were to learn every native language they encountered or have all the

natives learn one language and communicate with that. In 1580 in present day Colombia the *oidor*, a Spanish judge and member of the *Real Audencia*, Royal Appellate Court, Pedro Zorrillo informed the governing body of the new world the Council of the Indies that “the natives of New Granada were as ignorant (in spiritual matters) now as they had been before the conquest. This ignorance, according to Zorrillo, was the result of the recalcitrance of local priests, most of whom stubbornly refused to learn native languages.”¹⁴⁴ The reluctance of priests to learn native languages persisted for two decades with many leaders of different orders (Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian) arguing that “...these dialects [are] extremely poor in vocabulary, lacking such terms as Christ, charity, grace, contrition, penitence, etc., [and] they possess indecent expressions for terms such as incarnation and virginity; and therefore it would be less inconvenient to oblige the Indians to learn Spanish.”¹⁴⁵ As previously discussed in the works of Pharo and Todorov the problem of finding word equivalencies was a legitimate concern for the Spanish. When the problem persisted after twenty years they knew they needed a better way to communicate with the Indians.

The proposal of the Indians learning Spanish had its advantages and disadvantages; most Spanish officials believed that the native languages did not have the intricacy to fully convey the deep meaning of the concepts of Christianity while at the same time some friars believed it to be too much of a burden for them to set aside time to teach Spanish to the natives on top of all their other responsibilities.¹⁴⁶ As previously mentioned in the Aztec empire alone there were dozens of

¹⁴⁴J. Michael Francis, “Language and the ‘True Conversion’ to the Holy Faith: A Document from the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome, Italy,” *The Americas* 62 (2006): 445.

¹⁴⁵ Humberto Triana y Antorveza, *Las lenguas indígenas en la historia social del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1987): 414 as quoted in Francis, Michael J., “Language and the ‘True Conversion’ to the Holy Faith,” 446.

¹⁴⁶ Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, 51-52.

languages spoken by people in daily life, therefore, teaching Spanish to them all necessitated knowledge of the different languages. The resources necessary for that type of endeavor were beyond the scope of possibility, so the Franciscans took a different approach and taught the Indians in their charge Nahuatl, unifying different groups with a common “Mexican” language. With all Indians speaking one language the Franciscans performed sermons and catechisms in Nahuatl, meanwhile “the Crown was not at all hostile to the study and teaching of the native languages, but it believed that none of them was sufficiently rich and supple to allow it to be used for explaining the mysteries of the Christian faith... it never ceased to insist at the same time that all Indians be taught Spanish.”¹⁴⁷ By allowing rituals to be performed in Nahuatl, but demanding the Indians learn Spanish, the Crown hoped to solve the language barrier in the present and ensure that in future generations Spanish would be the main language for daily life and religion.

Once the Franciscans determined the main language of their teachings to be Nahuatl they still faced the problem of finding words that did not exist in that language to express Christian dogma. The Crown’s desire that all Indians learn Spanish meant to eliminate this problem, but early in the conquest it was impossible to educate the Indians in language and religion at the same time quickly enough to achieve the massive conversion desired by the Crown. Robert Ricard examines two different methods used to articulate important religious concepts: first, introducing the Spanish word into the native language, and second, translating it. The first method discussed is similar to how present day English takes words from Spanish without a translation and integrates it into the lexicon. For example, the word “piñata,” is a Spanish word that has no English equivalent because the same word is used in both languages, however, any

¹⁴⁷ Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, 51.

attendant at a child's birthday party can give a definition of a piñata in English, but not Spanish. This was the first method discussed by Ricard and he points out that assimilating the Spanish word into the Nahuatl language was the best way to avoid confusion, or a false word equivalency because if the Indians could incorrectly associate a Spanish word with a Nahuatl word the true meaning would be lost. Ricard argues that "this scruple was pushed to the extreme of never using the Nahuatl word *teotl* to designate God, but the Spanish *Dios*, to emphasize the difference between the pagan divinities and the single God of the Christians."¹⁴⁸ This method tries to avoid the pitfalls of direct translation and the problem of word equivalencies and is more understanding of the cultural context surrounding certain words. The method of direct translation is an attempt to make Christianity less of a foreign concept in the hopes that Indians will embrace it more readily and not look at it as something wholly Spanish. However, this method does revive the problem of misconstrued meaning due to false word equivalencies. In his examination of various Nahuatl texts James Lockhart describes how indigenous chroniclers, under the direction of Bernardino Sahaguan, used Nahuatl words to describe Spanish things they had never seen, "they include *maçatl* 'deer' for horse; *tlequiquiztli* 'fire trumpet,' for firearm; *quauhtemalacatl* 'wooden circular stone', hence 'wooden wheel' for cart ..."¹⁴⁹ This method of translation, finding the most logical equivalency for words means that those words in Nahuatl will now always have two meanings, and the same is true for words used to translate religious words, which creates a problem of ambiguity.

The Twelve friars who began the conversion process in Latin America immediately recognized the need to learn indigenous languages because their attempts to use pictures and

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 56

¹⁴⁹James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 33.

gestures led to a superficial and Pavlovian recognition of Catholic rituals among the indigenous people, rather than a meaningful connection.¹⁵⁰ However, learning indigenous languages was not enough for the Spanish to communicate their message, as religion has its own language. Most methods of translating were ineffectual because they could never shed the ritual implications held within native languages. Language is much more than words, it is culture, history, and context, so two people using the same word can mean vastly different things based on their background and place in the world; such was the challenge of teaching new religious concepts to indigenous people, words had different meanings depending on who said them and how. Even using Spanish words to identify new concepts could not account for individual interpretations or comparisons the Indians made. During the conquest, the word *dios* to a Spaniard meant “God,” the one, true, Catholic god, but what was to stop the Indians from thinking *dios* was simply a name the Spanish gave their deity? Despite the fact that many people share common languages, language itself is a personal experience; word usage is a choice, influenced by a person’s worldview and the meanings that person has established in his or her own mind.

¹⁵⁰ Arjona, “The Twelve’ Meet a Language Requirement,” 260.

Conclusion

The Spanish conquest of Latin America was an incredible opportunity for a newly unified country to expand its empire and solidify its power in the world, but it was a massive undertaking the likes of which Ferdinand and Isabel had never seen. The Catholic Kings had taken a country from their enemies, but it was a fight that started long before their rule that they only had to finish. The conquest of Latin America was much more challenging. It required the resources to send ships and men across an ocean to fight in an unfamiliar land, the extent of which no Spaniard knew. No matter the perceived military advantages, the Spanish were fighting in uncharted territory and they did not have the comforts of home, nor did they have the option to expel their enemies as they did in Spain. They had to fight the indigenous populations differently than they had fought the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, the Spanish had the military organization and strategy to adapt to their new surroundings and eventually subdue the indigenous population.

When the time came to begin conversion efforts in the colonies the organization and strategy shown by the military was lacking among the religious orders. There were many factors the Spanish did not take into account when developing their strategy to convert the Indians; they could not use the same methods they had used against Muslims and Jews in Spain because the situations were not the same. Muslims and Jews were long known foes of the Catholics in Spain. When the Catholics eventually gained military and political control of the Iberian Peninsula, they could expel or punish religious minorities who refused to convert. Logically, expulsion of non-Catholics was not an option in the colonies because the Spanish were an invading force and could not displace the millions of Indians already inhabiting the Americas. They had to set their sights on converting a massive indigenous population. Though their passion was clear, the early

religious officials in the colonies seemed ill equipped to carry out a mission of such enormity: there were few friars in the colonies before “The Twelve” arrived and even with their arrival they only served a handful of cities in Mexico. They also lacked a definitive strategy to carry out a mission on such a grand scale; they practiced a system of trial and error, trying to find a way to make the Indians understand Catholicism instead of mimicking signs and parroting sounds of prayers. There were disagreements about what language to use for conversion because any use of indigenous language automatically used words already loaded with meaning and context for the Indians. The introduction of Castilian words needed some explanation, which was problematic when the Indians did not yet speak Castilian. Any explanation of Spanish religious terms in indigenous languages again brought up the problem of Indians assigning their own meaning and interpretation to the words used.

The Spanish looked at indigenous practices through a European lens, calling their sacred objects idols, and saying the Devil spoke to them, not the false gods the Indians believed in; the Spanish believed the Indians practiced their religion like the Spanish did Catholicism, but they were wrong. Sacred indigenous rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs permeated every aspect of daily life; there was no separation between sacred and secular in indigenous culture. The Spanish underestimated the hold that the sacred had over all the people of the Americas, not only their rulers. The Spanish could separate their religious life from their daily life, so they assumed it was the same for indigenous people. Their ethnocentricity led them to believe that conversion was a matter of replacing many gods with one and banishing idols rather than understanding how indigenous beliefs informed their entire world. In some ways, the Spanish set themselves up for failure in their mission by immediately condemning indigenous books, records, monuments, and other objects as demonic and destroying them. Bernardino de Sahagún tried to remedy those

actions with his compilation of indigenous history and mythology, but the Spanish destroyed the majority of pre-Hispanic records that could have enlightened them to the indigenous worldview and helped them better understand how the Indians saw their place in the world.

Indians continued some versions of their traditional religious practices after Spanish conquest because they were trying to adapt to Catholicism, but could not shed the cultural worldview that they and their ancestors held for generations. The Indians needed to understand Catholicism within their world and to do that they could not abandon everything they knew. The Spanish thought they were trying to eradicate a religion, but they were faced with so much more; they were unknowingly trying to change thousands of years of cultural beliefs and practices that were based on maintaining a balance in the world. Conquistadors, friars, inquisitors could smash and burn idols, they could tear down monuments and build churches atop them, but they could not block out the sun, or stop the rain, or tear down the mountains, so they could never truly eradicate all that the Indians held sacred.

In the 1530s, The Spanish Crown did not sanction punishing Indians for cases of idolatry or heresy because the political and religious authorities recognized that the evangelization process was a long one and nowhere close to finished in the colonies. Therefore, the Indians were not responsible for their actions because they were still too naïve to understand the implications of what they did. Juan de Zumárraga eventually lost his post as Inquisitor in the colonies because he tried and punished Indians for their idolatrous practices against the wishes of the Crown, so there was some recognition from authorities that the original motivation behind indigenous idolatry was not a rejection of Catholicism. The example of Zumárraga was repeated thirty years later and more violently in the Yucatec by Friar Diego de Landa who was also recalled to Spain to face judgement for conducting his personal inquisition among the Indians,

but he was absolved and sent back to Mexico. At some point the idea that Indians be treated like *moriscos* in Spain and be given three generations, or about one hundred years, to convert to Catholicism and shed all vestiges of their previous religion was lost, as more and more trials of alleged idolaters took place.

Superficial similarities between indigenous religions and Catholicism opened a door for the Indians to incorporate Catholicism into their own beliefs, and combined with a Spanish misunderstanding of the role of the sacred in indigenous life, led the Spanish to use practices that encouraged a continuation of indigenous religion. Contradictory messages in evangelization processes allowed Indians to believe they were adding a new legend to their mythology, rather than replacing their beliefs, after all it seemed like images of Jesus or the Virgin Mary were joining the images of indigenous gods and taking their place in a long tradition of indigenous syncretism.

This thesis only scratches the surface of the extensive and rich traditions of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, and attempts to examine how indigenous worldviews shaped the conquest. Additional research is needed to further explore the blending of Catholic and indigenous practices and how it led to what the Spanish called idolatry among the Indians. When the Spanish saw indigenous people worshipping Catholic saints they considered it a triumph of their conversion efforts. A study of the evolution of saint worship and how it was blended with indigenous gods could show the level of syncretism of the two cultures. Additionally, post conquest indigenous art can give a visual representation of the mixing of symbols and religious documents in indigenous languages can show how Catholic ideas were presented and understood by the Indians. There are many paths to take to fully understand the indigenous people of Latin America at the time of conquest.

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