

The Process of Religious Conversion in Nahua Society

Introduction

During the conquest of Mexico and the years of submission to Spanish rule that followed, Nahua society experienced intense pressure to adopt Christian beliefs and cease the worship of their traditional gods. Although on the surface this attempt at complete religious conversion may appear successful, close scrutiny of historical documents indicates that in many ways the Nahuas succeeded in preserving traditional customs. The Spaniards achieved moderate success by including the Nahua in the governance of minor religious functions, but the Nahua abused the power associated with these positions, suggesting ulterior motives for readily accepting religious duties. Examination of early encounters between Spaniards and natives also provides many examples of indigenous groups enthusiastically adopting Christianity and submitting to Spanish rule, but over time these same natives proved remarkably adept at preserving their own traditions through manipulation of Christian practices. Through deception, the Nahua managed to continue many pre-conquest practices while maintaining an outward appearance of enthusiastic adoption of Christian beliefs.

Early Conversion and Indoctrination of the Nahua

Although attempts at conversion increased dramatically upon the arrival of the twelve Franciscan friars in 1524 (Pardo 2006:2), attempts to convert indigenous tribes took place throughout the conquest and frequently resulted in impressive mass conversions. One of the first mass conversions occurred in Tezcoco, where Hernán Cortés explained the sacrament of baptism to Ixtlinoxchitl, who in turn encouraged the rest of the altepetl, including his own reluctant mother, to convert to Christianity and seek baptism (León-Portilla 1992:11). This mass conversion greatly benefited the Spanish army, which gained Ixtlinoxchitl and his followers as allies in their campaign against Tenochtitlan. Although not an example of mass conversion, the story of the baptism of one of Moctezuma's sons demonstrates the successes of Christian development in the New World and illustrates one of many attempts made by the Spaniards to dehumanize those they conquered. According to the records of Toribio de Benevante, allegedly

one of Moctezuma's sons grew ill and asked that he be baptized. Once the priest began the sacrament, however, the prince began to shake rapidly and revealed himself to be possessed by demons (Pardo 2006:23). This event, whether truth or exaggeration, suggests that Spanish actions during the conquest could be justified by identifying the native peoples as victims of demonic possession needing liberation from their sinful natures.

The Difficulties of Translation

Following the end of the conquest, Spain sent friars to further develop the role of the Catholic Church within the New World by establishing churches and providing instruction to the indigenous peoples. The evangelization of the Nahuas proved especially difficult due to religious officials' poor understanding of the native language, and miscommunications between the two groups occurred frequently. For example, friars in the New World had difficulty expressing the concept of sin to the Nahuas because Nahua theology focused on a balance of chaos vs. order rather than a battle between good and evil (Burkhart 1989:37). The Spaniards also appealed to the Nahua concept of cleanliness and filth as a parallel to Christian doctrine, but inconsistencies between the two concepts prevented a complete adoption of Christian ideology. Because of the difficulties of translating Christian beliefs into the Nahua language, the friars exerted more effort in providing accurate translations to high ranking officials who could then pass this information on to their subjects (Cline 1993:460; Floristan 1992:140). The friars also employed young natives who spoke fluent Spanish to assist in the translations of sermons and religious texts (Floristan 1992:140).

The Nahua beliefs concerning the afterlife, which partially stem from the concepts of balance and chaos vs. order, differed greatly from Christian doctrine. The Nahuas believed that the Earth was located between a thirteen layer heaven and nine layer underworld, with different Nahua deities associated with the different layers (Burkhart 1989:47). Because Nahua beliefs did not focus on the concept of morality, the lifestyle of an individual did not fully determine one's fate after death. Counter to the principles and aspirations of Christian doctrine, the majority of the Nahua population expected to inhabit the underworld unless an individual died under very specific circumstances. Examples of the conditions necessary for entrance into heaven include deaths dedicated to the sun god, who selected sexually pure warriors to die in battle, granting them a spot in his level of heaven (Burkhart 1989:50). People who "drowned, were killed by lightning, or died of diseases... such as leprosy, gout, and dropsy" (Burkhart 1989:51) also gained entrance into heaven through their association with the rain god Tlalocan. Although this concept of the afterlife hardly paralleled Christian ideals, the Spaniards achieved some success by attempting to manipulate Nahua beliefs. For example, religious leaders asserted that the Nahua belief that most people, regardless of one's lifestyle, went to the underworld reflected the consequences of pre-conquest pagan beliefs. Due to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores and the subsequent indoctrination of the native peoples, the Spaniards claimed to have granted the Nahua access to heaven, an option never made available to the Nahua's pagan ancestors (Burkhart 1989:51).

Conflicting Views on Sexuality

The Spanish missionaries quickly grew concerned about the conduct of the Nahua regarding sexual morality. Unlike the Christian faith, which demanded abstinence until marriage, the Nahua engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage without much concern for morality, focusing more on moderation than abstinence. In fact, the Nahua vocabulary lacked a perfect translation for the word “virgin,” forcing the Nahua to invent phrases to represent this concept (Burkhart 1989:150). The Nahua practiced *nemecatiliztli*, a process of forming a bond between a couple wishing to engage in sexual activity without immediately getting married. Upon the conception of a child, tradition required that the couple marry each other, but otherwise the man could end the union at any time and tie himself to another partner. For the Nahua, marriage represented the transition to adulthood rather than the loss of one’s virginity (Burkhart 1989:150).

The Spaniards strongly opposed such views of sexual morality, preaching instead that Christians must refrain from sex when possible, engaging in sexual activity only for the purpose of procreation with one’s spouse (Burkhart 1989:151). The friars particularly condemned the practice of *nemecatiliztli*, a transgression comparable to concubinage which could prevent admission into heaven (Burkhart 1989:154). The friars began presenting a series of sermons which stressed the virtues of keeping one’s virginity and condemning the traditional behavior of the Nahua. Because the Nahua language lacked a word which accurately described the concept of virginity, Spaniards referred to the Virgin Mary as a “complete girl,” hoping to associate celibacy with holiness and purity. Although the Nahua priests also practiced celibacy, the Spaniards condemned them as well because “[their actions were] not done to the service of God” (Burkhart 1989: 157).

Despite many apparent differences between the Spaniards and Nahua regarding sexual morality, some Nahua traditions still applied to Christianized society. For example, the Nahua severely punished those who committed adultery, and those who sought abortions also put themselves in great danger. The Nahua strongly opposed the practice of abortion, threatening death to both the doctors and mothers who sought such a solution (Burkhart 1989:151). The Nahua also reserved the death penalty for those who practiced homosexuality, regardless of gender (Burkhart 1989:152).

The Structure of a Christianized Society

The Spaniards frequently attempted to use the political organization of Nahua society as a model for post-conquest organization, but such structures were often misinterpreted in favor of a more European perspective. For example, during the establishment of *encomendas*, the Spaniards assigned hierarchical ranks to the various *calpolli* of an *altepetl*, not realizing that in Nahua society all *calpolli* are given equal ranking (Horn 1997:23). Despite having a slightly flawed understanding of the organization of the *altepetl*, the Spaniards succeeded in using this existing

structure as a foundation for the establishment of parishes throughout the new world (Lockhart 1992:206).

Early in the development of the Christian Church of the New World, the Spaniards assigned certain religious duties to members of the Nahua upper class. The fiscal of the church received many responsibilities as the “general steward and manager of the church and all its assets and activities, the right-hand man and principal intermediary of the Spanish priest” (Lockhart 1992:210). Unfortunately, the institution of new Christianized positions, although necessary to facilitate interactions between the priests and the Nahua, often promoted corruption within the church. Josef de la Cruz, a fiscal in the early seventeenth century, abused the power of his position by charging high fees to Nahua families wishing to perform elaborate rituals and requiring that all children who attended catechism bring him maize (Lockhart 1992:212). Relatives of the recently deceased often accused fiscals such as Don Juan Miguel of taking advantage of the deceased’s families during the planning of funeral procedures. The fiscals often sold the land of these families to gain money for the masses which accompanied Christian funerals, often offering the land to friends and family at low prices (Lockhart 1992:214-215). Although less powerful than the regional *altepetl*, the *cofradías*, brotherhoods led by the Nahua, also played an important role in Christianized Mesoamerica. The *cofradías*, although originally initiated by the church, quickly developed into entirely Nahua-led organizations. This institution also created more religious positions for indigenous people. The *majordomo*, the primary officer of the *cofradía*, oversaw a variety of positions, ranging from high-ranking *diputados* to cooks and craftsmen. The members of a *cofradía* voted in elections to determine who held the position of *majordomo*, but these elections took place sporadically, and “although the ordinances foresaw annual elections, the replacement of offices was irregular” (Lockhart 1992:225). In these institutions, the Nahua women figured prominently, often representing over half the membership of the *cofradías*. Despite their prominence in membership rolls, descriptions of women fulfilling important functions do not appear until 1604. At this point, records indicate that the *cofradía* granted four elderly women authority over matters regarding organization, discipline, and finances (Lockhart 1992:226-227).

Christian Authority in the New World

As Spain gained power in the New World following the conquest, questions arose regarding the punishment of disobedient natives (Pardo 2006:79-81). Although the king initially designated secular officials to administer punishment, the church eventually took hold of this responsibility due to their greater familiarity with the natives. Despite a closer relationship with the Nahuas, however, even church officials often miscalculated the effects of certain punishments. For example, after a brief period of time the Nahuas became desensitized to punishments such as whipping and having their heads shaved, and the sense of shame intended to accompany such punishments disappeared (Pardo 2006:83).

Once natives became more accustomed to the principles of Christianity, religious

authorities introduced the practice of confession as another way of exerting religious dominance over the Nahuas. During times of confession, religious officials often focused on sexual immorality, which the Spaniards considered a common characteristic amongst the Nahuas (Marcos 1992:162-165; Burkhart 1998:369). Such perceptions of the Nahuas strengthened Spanish feelings of inherent superiority both on moral and intellectual grounds. Other common negative stereotypes included the idea that the Nahuas were “meek, obedient, humble, timid, malleable, and submissive” (Pineda 1992:158).

The Preservation of Nahua Traditions

Although the Nahuas submitted to Spanish authority and converted to Christianity, many pre-conquest traditions continued to serve important functions in Nahua society. The religious officials of the New World often did not impose specific religious practices on the Nahuas, but rather accepted any native practice that resembled Christian worship, allowing the Nahuas to frequently incorporate aspects of their native belief systems without the church’s knowledge. The friars began to teach the Nahuas songs and dances as forms of worship due to the natives’ enthusiastic participation, but scholars argue that this eagerness to participate reflects the values of an oral culture rather than an earnest desire to worship as Christians (Pineda 1992:160). Louise Burkhart gives an account of the first Christian procession of the Nahuas, which involved “the manufacture of regalia and the conducting of public performances” (Burkhart 1998:364). Burkhart suggests that the Nahuas’ active participation resulted more from the appeal of these two activities than from religious devotion.

Because the Spaniards lacked an extensive knowledge of the Nahuas’ language and traditional beliefs, the Nahuas often included subtle references to their supposedly abandoned beliefs which the Spaniards could not detect. For example, although the Nahuas accepted the concept of Christian saints, they often identified certain saints with a corresponding native god or goddess. As the Spaniards began to impose the worship of Christian saints upon the Nahuas, many gravitated towards those who were worshipped on the same days as already existing Nahua deities. This practice prompted friars to study the Aztec calendar in greater detail in order to discourage idolatry (Hassig 2001:161). In addition to choosing saints with worship dates similar to Nahua deities, the Nahuas also worshipped saints that fulfilled the same function of native deities and frequently incorporated them into traditional Nahua stories. In stories involving the goddesses Cihuacoatl, Quilaztli, and Yohualticitl, the Nahuas replaced their own deities with the Virgin Mary (Burkhart 1999:103). Biblical texts were also modified during translation in order to reflect traditional Nahua culture and beliefs. In a Nahua account of the conversion of Paul, the author describes a man Paul killed named Sebastian, who “swept the roads that led to heaven,” an action that closely resembles one of the responsibilities of Nahua priests (Christensen 2010; Harris 1992:14).

Nahua Performances and Silent Rebellion

Although the Spaniards did not always understand all aspects of Nahua language, the Nahuas were nevertheless encouraged to pursue the development of religious plays (West 1989;

Burkhart 1989, 1996, 1997). Initially, the Spaniards insisted that the Nahua translate works written by Spaniards, a practice which was intended to discourage the Nahua from including traditional pagan doctrine in their performances. The Nahuas involved in such productions, when included in the writing process, frequently included subtle references to Nahua deities as well as messages indicating dissatisfaction with their Spanish conquerors. Before the performance of *The Conquest of Rhodes*, the Nahuas presented a short play known as *La Batalla de los Salvajes*, which depicted two groups of savages skirmishing until being overpowered by a large group of Africans. Scholar Jerome Williams believes that this play may be a satire of the Spanish conquest in which Spanish superiority is challenged by having the conquistadores played by Africans (Harris 1992:22). In this way Nahuas may have succeeded in mocking the Spaniards while under the pretense of worshipping God through theatre.

Conclusion

Despite persistent attempts by the Spaniards, evangelization efforts in Mesoamerica failed to fully convert the Nahua, resulting in a unique blend of traditional ideology and European Christian doctrine. Initial attempts at expressing the fundamentals of Christianity quickly revealed the difficulties of conveying ideology to a civilization with vastly different values and a relatively indifferent attitude towards concepts such as morality. By examining historical documents, scholars have identified numerous instances where native religious beliefs persisted, reflecting subtle but intentional rebellion against certain teachings of the Catholic Church. Although the Spaniards succeeded in forcing the Nahuas to adopt the appearance of a Christian society, an imperfect understanding of Nahua language provided natives the opportunity to continue worshipping their own deities and express their true opinions of Spanish rule. These events demonstrate the complexities which arise when a conquered nation manages to retain certain traditions and suggest that by failing to immediately impose the Spanish language upon the Nahua, the Spaniards provided many opportunities for subtle Nahua resistance.

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