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The Construction of Race and Ethnicity in Latin America

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Transnational Histories: Intersecting across Religion and Culture

In this paper I argue, that the rise of the Catholic Church, and Christianity through British and Spanish colonialism created a nationalist sentiment amongst indigenous and Ugandan people,, while also providing conduits for resistance through syncretic and liberatory expressions of faith. My understanding of this topic has changed over time. This transnational project is broad, and I won't answer all of my questions. I am learning more about the complexities of faith, and the politicization of religion, and its unique neutrality. I am still questioning the role of women in religion - the significance of La Virgen de Guadalupe, and her as one of the limited examples of women in church, but also in culture. The Ugandan Martyrs were all men, however, women must have been affected, but where? Where are the women?

The project has developed through hours of reading and research. The overarching theme of colonialism and imperialism drives all the other themes. I was interested in the intersection of faith and politics, and the manipulation that often occurs, and the paper discusses that. It is exciting to research a topic that is applicable to my life. I was raised Catholic, and as an adult, I'm wrestling with this history of conversion and resistance to that conversion, through the nuances of Ugandan and indigenous spirituality.

This paper aims to complicate the reader's notions of religion and religious syncretism in Mexico and Uganda. In Latin America specifically, faith is forged uniquely by the presence of the indigenous people and the power of the state, which was the Catholic Church for the most part. In both Mexico and Uganda there are similar histories of colonization. Spanish colonialism differed from British colonialism in various ways. Spanish colonialism's roots were more in the interest of acquiring land and spreading Christianity. British colonialism was more focused on land and profit rather than Christianity. They did not spend much time associating with Indigenous people, rather than building up an economic infrastructure for themselves. The Spanish sought to decimate the Aztec culture in order to make room for their plans. The factors that led to the colonization of Mexico were varied. Spain had wealth, but the population was booming. The land scarcity was widespread across Europe. Due to the shortage, there was a need to expand into the New World. After Columbus stumbled upon the Caribbean, it became the catalyst for opportunity to claim ownership over the Americas.

The nature of British colonialism had different motivations at the heart of it. Some reasonings were shared with Spain, a rival power of theirs, with limited land and resources, but profit was central. In Africa, France, Belgium, and Spain had started to claim indigenous lands in the northwestern region of Africa. Going to Africa was the result of debt and overall economic hardship in the United Kingdom. Britain had lost control of international trade, and saw Africa as the opportunity to seize control of marketable resources, like diamonds, copper, and rubber. Africa was also a bridge to Asian ports. ¹British colonialism focused more intensely on trade and

¹"The Colonization of Africa." The Colonization of Africa. Accessed September 11, 2016. <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-colonization-of-africa.html>.

managing resources, while Spanish colonialism was interested in converting native peoples to Catholicism and developing a society.

Both countries had complex relationships with their respective colonizers. Mexico defeated the Aztec Empire through a combination of disease, destruction of culture, and enslavement. In the beginning, Cortes built relationships with the Aztecs². He relied on a woman, Dona Marina³, to translate his Spanish into Nahuatl, the Aztec language. The importance of this relationship cannot be minimized as her contribution led to the overall conquest of Mexico. A woman stepping into this role of translator and diplomat is a powerful one. She was not just a translator, but she took leadership and assisted Cortes in working with and against her people. Her life is interesting, because she made the most of her situation by ultimately working against her people.

In Buganda, (the kingdom of which is now present day Uganda) the relationship between colonizer/colonized was also difficult. There were several kingdoms in the area that feuded with and had alliances with Buganda.⁴ In the midst of that tension, a religious civil war developed due to the large amount of Protestant and Catholic missionaries attempting to convert African peoples. A Muslim faction was also present, because Muslim traders found their way to East African kingdoms. Some of the Muganda who did convert took leadership and forged alliances

² "Historia Verdadera De La Conquista De La Nueva España. Tomo I." Díaz Del Castillo, Bernal (1492-1581). Accessed September 1, 2016. <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/servlet/SirveObras/01715418982365098550035/ima0047.htm>.

³ "Women in World History : MODULE 6." Women in World History : MODULE 6. Accessed September 11, 2016. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson6/lesson6.php?s=0>.

⁴ "A History of Christianity in Uganda." A History of Christianity in Uganda. Accessed August 24, 2016. [http://www.dacb.org/history/a history of christianity in uganda.html](http://www.dacb.org/history/a%20history%20of%20christianity%20in%20uganda.html).

with the British. One leader of the Protestant faction, Apolo Kagwa, had a position in the Buganda court. An early protestant convert, Kagwa assisted the British as he was one of the key people who signed the Uganda Agreement, signing away Uganda's autonomy.

The Buganda kingdom's sovereignty shifted and changed over time. Different kings had drastically different ways of handling situations in the kingdom, and I believe that the inconsistency of power allowed for civil war to erupt and for people like Kagwa to exploit that power. King Mwanga abused his position, "seizing livestock...[implementing] daily taxation."⁵ He also was pivotal in the Uganda Martyrs' situation that I will discuss in the following paragraphs. The Aztecs were pummeled by the combination of diseases, such as smallpox, and the destruction of their cities. The Spanish had succeeded in conquering Mexico. The English had just begun to claim Uganda for themselves.

The Catholic Church used religion as a tool to control the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Uganda. Religion is not just a form of belief, but it is also an institution of social and political control. When religion enters a country, it can result in the eradication of traditions that were already present in the place. The act of bringing Christianity brought a new spiritual tradition to the indigenous peoples, but also resulted in the loss of hundreds, or in some cases, thousands of years of culture. In Mexico, indigenous people often converted, or used conversion and faith to negotiate unfair systems. In rare instances, priests would advocate for indigenous people. People like Bartolome De Las Casas were the rare priests who defended natives, and

⁵ Reid, Richard. *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda: Economy, Society and Welfare in the Nineteenth Century / Edition 1*. Vol. 1. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

wanted adequate rights for them. On the other hand, he also defended the use of black people as substitutes for indigenous slavery.

In Uganda, there was a complicated situation where the king conflicted with both British missionaries and Ugandan converts to Christianity. King Mwanga II⁶, resisted the advances of missionaries on how he ruled his kingdom. He felt that it was within his rights to defend his culture. One aspect of that culture, was the right for the king to have relations with anyone he chose - male or female. Ganda culture did not accept homosexuality, but the king was within his rights to do as he pleased. After a sexual rejection from his male pages, he declared that he had the ultimate dominion over Buganda. Converts and missionaries did not have that same power. Mwanga massacred 30 men, 22 of which were burned at the stake. These men are known as the Ugandan Martyrs. As they died defending their faith, they became a symbol of a Ugandan commitment to faith, and the overwhelming sense of “traditional Ugandan values”. The narrative of what is traditional changed after this event. The role of Mwanga has been forgotten, and has turned into the story of Catholics defending their faith, which is true, but there is an important nuance to the story of Mwanga II and the Ugandan Martyrs that has to be voiced. After the introduction of Catholicism to Uganda, a syncretic interpretation of the church occurred. Certain indigenous traditions like witch doctors, and shrines to ancestors mix with Catholic rosaries and mass. The history of Ugandan spirituality is marked with the internal conflicts between groups. The example of the Ugandan Martyrs displays the complicated nature of religion conflicting with indigenous political power.

⁶"BUGANDA." BUGANDA. Accessed September 11, 2016.
<http://www.royalark.net/Uganda/buganda7.htm>.

In Mexico, the imagery of *Virgen de Guadalupe* is iconic. She has become a symbol of Mexico, and she is Mexico's patron saint. Her story is important as the Marian apparition occurred to an Aztec man⁷ - not a Spanish citizen. The account of Juan Diego, says this, ⁸“And to bring about what my compassionate and merciful concern is trying to achieve, you must go to the residence of the Bishop of Mexico and tell him that I sent you here to show him how strongly I wish him to build me a temple here on the plain,” and this is important because it shows the blurred lines where religion and culture and conquest collide into each other. La Virgen de Guadalupe is currently the most visited Catholic shrine in the world.

As time went on, hundreds of years later, Mexico changed, but issues were much still the same. During Lazaro Cardenas' reign as president, conflicts emerged between the postrevolutionary government and the Mexican indigenous peasants. Marjorie Becker's *Setting the Virgin on Fire* provides a look into the syncretic forms of Catholic faith among the indigenous groups during that time period. In the book, we see the change in depiction around the Virgen de Guadalupe. Instead of reflecting the poor, dark-skinned peasant, instead she is whiter, blonder, and draped in gold. This shift is important because it shows that her likeness has been co-opted to fit the status quo of the hierarchy. She is central to the peasants' lives, but she is also being used by the state. The author also explores the Catholic fascination with poverty and suffering in the form of Mary. She says, ⁹“After all, Mary had been but a Nazarethene peasant

⁷ Brading, D. A. *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition across Five Centuries*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁸ "Mary's Words at Guadalupe." *Mary's Words at Guadalupe*. Accessed September 11, 2016. <http://www.theotokos.org.uk/pages/approved/words/wordguad.html>.

⁹ Becker, Marjorie. *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*. University of California Press, 1995.

silenced because of poverty, religion, and gender. Even her own son had scorned her.” This move in depiction of La Virgen is powerful, because it illuminates the larger shift in the depiction of both women in this period and the needs of the poor. The peasants use and cling to their syncretic worship of the Virgin Mary as a form of protest and veneration. La Virgen is for them, not for the wealthy elite. La Virgen chose to appear to a peasant, not a Spaniard. The peasants were aware of the issues they were facing and found ways to navigate their limitations by using their faith. They demanded that their rights be respected and the Catholic Church restored. The peasants faith was liberatory, but it was also used against them. Cardenas ended up using their demands to lure them to his side. Cardenas ends up needing to adopt and accept the indigenous customs and traditions in order to stay viable as a leader. Religion in this sense is both malleable and rigid.

This is not something that was left behind in the 20th century, either. In the essay,¹⁰ “The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?” Jeanette Favrot Peterson explores the concept of La Virgen and questions her use as a symbol of liberation by focusing on events from the revolutionary period of Mexico. She notes how La Virgen served a dual purpose: to galvanize support for the government, and to maintain political power for the elites. She states, “The Virgin of Guadalupe's role as an intercessor was stressed by the church. She was appealed to as a mediator between the native petitioner and higher authorities, both celestial and civil; as a "model of acceptance and legitimation of colonial authority," Guadalupe thus encouraged the status quo.” I see how the Virgin was used to create a model of support for the Church.

¹⁰ Peterson, Jeanette Favrot. "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?" *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (1992): 39. doi:10.2307/777283.

The dynamic of the La Virgen de Guadalupe being a symbol of liberation and also a symbol of Catholic oppression is a complex one. I see that indigenous peoples find something revolutionary in the dark-skinned woman that works on their behalf. In the case of indigenous peoples in Mexico, it makes sense that people would gravitate towards that symbol. However, once the state co-opts that symbol in order to support the initiatives of the elite, that creates questions. Can something be both liberatory and oppressive? How do people find freedom in things that are directly connected to their oppression? Through this paper, I have explored those questions.

Throughout this research I have spent the time attempting to find reasonings as to why indigenous peoples in two similar, yet different countries found some solace in their nuanced faith. I think it is a clever form of resistance when people use their limited accessibility to an unknown culture to their advantage and find truly redeeming in the conflict. In this paper, I acknowledge that I could not address everything with equal impact, but at the core, I wanted to understand how religion is used as a tool in colonized countries, specifically Mexico and Uganda, as both a form of oppression and liberation.