Religion in New Spain

Edited by
SUSAN SCHROEDER
and
STAFFORD POOLE

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CHAPTER THREE

COMMUNAL DEFIANCE, DIVIDED ALLEGIANCES

Zapotec Responses to Idolatry Extirpation Campaigns in Oaxaca

DAVID TAVÁREZ

On September 24, 1700, a confrontation that preased the end of local attempts to maintain dual spheres of worship in colonial Zapotec communities took place in San Francisco Cajones, a town in the southern reaches of the alcaldía mayor of Villa Alta. Sometime between eight and eleven o'clock at night, following a confidential report from San Francisco residents don Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Ángeles, the town vicar fray Alonso de Vargas and the minister fray Gaspar de los Reyes caught many of the inhabitants of San Francisco Cajones engaging in a communal ritual act in the house of Joseph Flores, the chief officer (mayordomo) of the local confraternity of Saint Joseph. Flores's guests—who included many of San Francisco's inhabitants—had plucked and beheaded some turkeys, and were in the process of bleeding a doe to death in order to fill some containers with its blood, as they repeated some prayers in Zapotec before images of Christian saints with their faces turned toward the walls. One detail held the mendicants' attention: several male and female children who were praying on their knees imparted a jarring touch of innocence to what seemed to be a despicable act. The celebrants fled the house, leaving the friars to consolate the remains of the sacrificed animals and other implements.

On the evening of the next day, an enraged native crowd surrounded the church of San Francisco, where the Dominicans, the two informants, and about a dozen non-Indians had sought refuge. Vicar Vargas took out an image of the Virgin Mary and asked the crowd to disperse, but only received mocking responses and hostile remarks. The mob shouted threats and threw stones at the church, while its defenders used arquebuses to shoot first into the air and then into the crowd, killing at least one native rebel. However, when the defenders ran out of ammunition, they decided to surrender the two native informants. After don Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Ángeles were handed over, they were taunted, whipped at the pillory, and taken away to a nearby mountain where they were executed. Juan Antonio de Mier y Tejo, alcaldí mayor (chief magistrate) of Villa Alta, immediately began an investigation into the fate of the two Zapotec informants.

The townspeople initially claimed that the informants had fleed the Cajones area, but after the imprisonment and interrogation of about thirty-four revolt participants, the alcaldí mayor obtained a full confession. After a protracted trial for rioting, murder, idolatry, and insubordination that lasted from November 1700 until January 1702—requiring several consultations with the viceroy and the Audiencia—Mier y Tejo handed down an especially unforgiving form of exemplary punishment. On January 11, 1702, fifteen of the Cajones rebels were hanged and quartered after being sentenced to death without appeal, and their remains were exhibited in San Francisco Cajones and along the main road to Oaxaca. The following day, two more defendants were paraded in an auto de fe.

The structural features of this rebellion—the apparent lack of a guiding ideology or premeditation, the collective nature of the response against the ministers, the swift punishment of the informants—suggest that a key triggering factor was the interference of the Dominicans and their informants, which may have broken the collective expectation that some of these communal realms could be maintained beyond the reach of the church and its agents in the local sphere. Such an approach echoes E. P. Thompson's well-known model of a peasant "moral economy," which argues that peasant populations may rebel against the ruling class once the traditionally accepted boundaries of economic and political subjection are trespassed by government officials. However, unlike James Scott's precise formulation of an economic model that depicts boundary conditions for the moral balance between rulers and subjects, the task of defining what demands or contingencies may trigger the collective defense of a moral economy in a colonial situation may call for a more complex—and subjective—assessment of the meaning of boundaries and expectations.

Before we can produce a full account of implicit expectations in a situation of colonial hegemony, we should provide an adequate account of local strategies in the context of colonial evangelization, and we should relate these strategies to the production of specific arrangements for local forms of worship that coexisted with more orthodox practices. Therefore, in order to attain a full understanding of the drive and motivations of this particular native revolt, we must address the series of confrontations among native ritual specialists, native officials, and colonial authorities that took place in the last quarter of the seventeenth century in southern Villa Alta, both before and after the 1702 revolt at Cajones. It is only through a lengthy examination of evidence regarding ecclesiastical attempts to investigate and suppress certain ritual
practices, native strategies for maintaining local spheres of worship beyond the reach of these attempts, local factionalism as it assessed the wisdom of engaging in a rebellion, and the relative political weight of various colonial authorities that we may arrive at a full account that may be tied to a thesis of a higher order—either the moral economy argument, or another argument describing the emergence of peasant and native consciousness in a colonial context. This essay should be read as a first step in this direction.

This essay begins with a brief appraisal of the ecclesiastical policies against idolatry in the early 1700s. This appraisal will introduce a specific local response to extirpation efforts in Villa Alta that were defended by local control over dual spheres of worship in the Zapotec towns of Betaza and Lachitac. Rather than reducing these events to an inventory of economic or political vulgarity that pushed moral consensus in one direction or another, this essay will depict the collective objectives of Zapotec office holders in action as they strove to defend a local notion of autonomy supported by their public engagement in collective ritual practices. It should be stressed here that a full discussion of local factionalism is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses instead on a description of the social and economic organization that maintained a separation between two parallel realms of ritual practice: one Christian and official, and the other local and collective. Finally, this essay will present a hypothesis regarding the contrasting local responses to ecclesiastical measures against idolatry in Cajones in 1700, and in Betaza and Lachitac in 1704.

Civil and Ecclesiastical Idolatry Extirpation Policies in Oaxaca, 1665-1695

A consideration of the “spiritual conquest” of Villa Alta from the mid-sixteenth century onward goes well beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, this essay will discuss ecclesiastical policies toward idolatry suspects—which have been incorporated into John K. Chacon’s extensive discussion of colonial Villa Alta—beginning with the indigenous rebellion of Tehuantepec in 1660, which may be seen as the intensification of the series of confrontations and conflict between native communities and ecclesiastical and civil authorities in both Villa Alta and the Isthmus area in Oaxaca. On March 23, 1660, a large group of Zapotecos who had congregated in the Isthmus town of Tehuantepec for Holy Week celebrations rioted against and killed their alcalde mayor Juan de Avellán, along with two of his associates. The rebels then appointed new local authorities, sought the support of neighboring native communities via letters and meetings, and maintained control over the surrounding region for the following year. Exactly two months later, on Corpus Christi, the Zapotecos of Nexapa also rose up in arms, forcing a military standoff which was resolved only through the mediation of bishop Cueva y Dávalos. During 1660 and 1661, the rebellion spread like wildfire—to use its chronicler’s simile of choice—through several Chontal, Huave, Mixe, Zapotec, and Zoque communities.

This sequence of events occupies a unique place in the historiography of New Spain due to its nutrimentic character and its sudden expansion over a large swath of Oaxaca. One may ask what could have motivated native peoples from linguistically and culturally diverse communities to form an unprecedented (and short-lived) alliance against Spanish rule. There exist two complementary analyses that have attempted a response to this question. One analytical view espoused by Hector Díaz-Polanco et al. reassembles a cumulative theory that resembles the moral economy argument: taxation abuses related to the repartimientos; followed by the punishment and humiliation of recalcitrant native elites, may have provided a spark for the Tehuantepec rebellion. On the other hand, Marcelo Carmagnani stresses the symbolic use of social space by native rebels and colonial officials, and emphasizes the differential participation by native actors at various stages in the rebellion. In his view, rather than a rebellion, this movement was a confrontation against the expanding political role of the alcalde mayor, which collided with the reformulation of communal identity in the seventeenth-century Oaxaca.

In a development that seems to confirm Carmagnani’s observations about the expanding powers of alcalde mayores in seventeenth-century Oaxaca, between 1665 and 1736 Villa Alta’s alcalde mayores and deputy governors (tenientes de alcalde) presided over at least a dozen trials against Indians accused of engaging in idolatry or sorcery, according to surviving records. Under other circumstances, the attempt to take native defendants of crimes against the faith before a civil judge would have been regarded as a violation of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over such crimes. Nevertheless, the extant trials housed in the judicial archives of two alcalde mayores in Oaxaca—Villa Alta and Tepoztecolula—provide evidence to support the argument that, besides marking a transition in episcopal policies toward idolatry, the decade of the 1760s was also characterized by more frequent judicial interventions by civil authorities in cases of native idolatry and superstition. Both bishops Monterroso (1665–1678) and Del Puerto (1679–1681) held in high esteem the cooperation of civil authorities in inaccessible regions regarded as prone to rebellion, as was the case in Villa Alta. In fact, it was during Del Puerto’s brief tenure as bishop that the six towns in the Cajones region—San Francisco, San Mateo, San Pedro, Santo Domingo, San Pablo, and San Miguel—regained their saliency as strongholds of idolatry in the consciousness of the extirpators. In a 1679 letter to the crown, Del Puerto reports the discovery of a “high priest” who, along with four others, exercised a parallel ministry in some of these six towns. These specialists received the same deferential treatment accorded to Christian priests, heard confessions, and admonished their followers not to confess with the Christian priests. Del Puerto had these specialists imprisoned in the royal jail of Oaxaca City, intending to exile them permanently from their native communities. Ildo Sarıhams (1683–1696), Del Puerto’s successor, was the first bishop of Oaxaca to support extirpation efforts with the establishment of a novel punitive institution in Oaxaca City: a prison devoted to the
permanent seclusion of "teachers of idolatries" and recidivist idolaters that would be known as the "perpetual prison of idolaters." After arguing that such a prison was required to curb native idolaty, Sariñana obtained a grant of 5,000 pesos de oro from the crown for the project and began building this prison only a few streets west of the cathedral, and announced its completion in a 1692 letter to the crown. However, Sariñana's prison lasted only a few years: First, an earthquake devastated many buildings in Oaxaca City, including this prison; then, in November 1696, Sariñana died, leaving the prison’s finances in a state of uncertainty. Sariñana’s prison building had been so devastated by the earthquake and the subsequent lack of funds that bishop fray Ángel Maldonado (1702–1728) abandoned it in order to establish a new prison in a different area of Oaxaca City. Bishop Maldonado inherited Sariñana’s punitive project, and turned it into one of the supporting pillars of the existing extirpation campaigns he carried out in Villa Alta in the first decade of the eighteenth century.

Although the September 1700 Cajones rebellion was unusual in its defiance of ecclesiastical authority, the Dominicans resident in southern Villa Alta could not have been surprised by the acts of collective defiance, and by the unyielding persistence of suspicious practices in southern Villa Alta. Two documents drafted to counter Maldonado’s contention that idolaty had prospered in Villa Alta due to Dominican leniency—a December 1704 letter from fray Joseph Castilla to his provincial, and a July 1706 Dominican testimony drawn up before an escribano (notary)—indicate that at least fifteen Dominicans had worked as extirpators of idolaty in the last decades of the seventeenth century in the Villa Alta towns of Yate, Yee, San Francisco Cajones, Zoogocha, and Yatachi. Unfortunately, few details about the trials organized by these extirpators have survived. On the other hand, an April 1691 riot in the town of Zoocichila—which was triggered by a Dominican friar’s attempt to arrest some of the town’s officials and its chairma
tor—bears some structural resemblance to the Cajones revolt of 1700, except for its resolution. After a short-lived confrontation, the Zoogocha rebels, the Dominican minister, and colonial officials reached an uncertain point of equilibrium when the town officials were freed, motivating the rebels to put down their weapons, return to their daily lives, and beg the forgiveness of the Dominican minister—which was granted immediately—only days after the rebellion.

Maldonado’s Amnestia: A Novel Approach to Extirpation Policies

Between 1702 and 1728, Oaxaca Bishop fray Ángel Maldonado would assume a particularly activist position on the issue of native ritual practices, which would lead to the loss of parish control by the Dominicans and would join the growing influence of the alcaldes mayores of Villa Alta as external factors that impinged on the internal affairs of native communities. Upon his arrival in Oaxaca on July 30, 1702, Bishop Maldonado learned about the 1700 Cajones revolt and the current state of the legal procedures, and decided to carry out a personal inspection (visita). On November 1702, Maldonado departed on an exhaustive visit of Villa Alta, during which he inspected seventeen endowed curates (beneficiaries), confirmed more than 4,000 natives, undertook a number of abridged idolaty proceedings, and sent several idolaty convicts to be incarcerated in the new prison for idolaters he had erected near the orchards of Santo Domingo el Grande in Oaxaca City as a substitute for Sariñana’s prison.

During his first visit to Villa Alta in late 1702 and early 1703, Maldonado discovered that the idolaters of this region were not only rebellious, but also highly accomplished authors of clandestine ritual texts. In order to extract information about local maestros, ritual practices, and ritual texts, Maldonado appointed the parish priest of Ejutla, Joseph de Aragón y Alcántara—Sariñana’s leading secular extirpator during the 1680s—as his Visitar General, and took him along on his first visit. However, as Maldonado later indicated in a Latin epistle to Clement XI in April 1708, his first scrutiny of the inhabitants of Villa Alta only led him to suspect that they concealed “even greater abominations.” In order to motivate the natives of Villa Alta to confess their idolatrous activities, turn in their ritual texts, and denounce their local maestros in exchange for an absolution, Maldonado tried an innovative approach to the announcement of his amnesty measures. According to later testimony presented to the crown by Dominican Procurator General Antonio de Torres, Maldonado selected one of the eleven defendants from San Francisco that were surrendered to him by the alcalde mayor, placed his pectoral around his neck, and ordered him to travel throughout the region of Villa Alta announcing his offer of absolution. Maldonado’s offer was simple and non-negotiable: in exchange for denouncing their ritual specialists, turning in the clandestine ritual texts that several generations of extirpators had called “books of the devil,” and making a full confession about communal and private ritual practices, each native community would benefit from both a general absolution and an amnesty from any formal trial.

When Maldonado returned to Villa Alta for a second visita in 1704, he organized an exhaustive investigation into native ritual practices. He was assisted in this task by several extirpators: the indispensable Visitor General Aragón y Alcántara, the Dominican minister of San Ildefonso fray Joseph de Contreras, and the secular priests Miguel Martínez de Salamanca, Domingo Zenón y Cerdán, and Juan Manuel de Urbina. Following cooperation guidelines that had been established through earlier extirpation attempts between the bishopric and Villa Alta, the alcaldede mayor Diego de Rivera y Cotes assisted Maldonado and Aragón y Alcántara during their visit, and turned over the testimonies of about forty-five “teachers of idolatry” who had been imprisoned in the royal jail of Villa Alta. Maldonado’s offer of mercy, coupled with the fresh memory of the exemplary punishment that had been visited upon the Cajones rebels, convinced many residents of Villa Alta communities to yield at least some of their specialists and ritual implements. At the request of Maldonado, between November 1704 and February 1705, the elected authorities of most of the 104 native communities in Villa Alta—representing a
native population of about 60,000 according to Maldonado's count—journeyed to San Ildefonso to register a communal confession before Aragón y Acuña in order to benefit from Maldonado's amnesty. Through this innovative extirpation strategy, Maldonado harvested 103 separate manuscript versions of the 260-day Zapotec ritual calendar, or pozó, and about thirty-seven Zapotec ritual songs, which had been composed to be performed during communal ritual practices to the beat of a cylindrical drum called axtanci in Zapotec and tepozamzli in Nahuatl.

Maldonado vs. the Dominicans: Ecclesiastical and Political Reforms, 1704-1712
Maldonado's growing disillusionment with the state of doctrinal education in native communities in Villa Alta and elsewhere led him to take a reformist position that clashed with the interest of the Dominicans in preserving the status quo. Shortly after his 1704 Villa Alta visit, Maldonado proposed to the crown the creation of six new curates. In an intermediate chapter celebrated in May 1703, the Dominicans agreed to this petition, but requested that these curates be filled by Dominicans. Maldonado agreed, and these regulars were given their appointments through the bishop—a novel form of episcopal intervention in doctrinal matters that the Dominicans had long regarded as internal. In August 1706, Maldonado upped the ante by asking the crown to confirm the creation of eleven new curates—Zochítil, Tabas, Yáñges, Betaza, Lachixila, Comaltepec, Lutani, Santa María, Poxmeztacan, Ayutla, and Atalacatepec.

The Dominicans attempted to counteract Maldonado's proposals at every step, both in Oaxaca and at the Council of Indies. Although the details of this controversy exceed the scope of this essay, the arguments for and against the division of curates that were based on the proliferation of idolatry may be summarized in two broad categories: the effectiveness of Dominican doctrinal administration and the number of missions that Villa Alta and other geographically isolated regions required for the administration of sacraments. These pitched confrontations were interrupted in June 1712 when pro-Dominican forces in Madrid convinced King Philip V to remove Maldonado from Oaxaca by appointing him to the diocese of Orihuela—a small but comfortable bishopric in Murcia (Spain). However, since Maldonado had already reached an agreement with the Dominican provincial, he was able to reject this offer in December 1712, arguing that the common agreement would solve the impasse over the partitioning of curates.

From Omens to Confrontation: Communal Resistance to Extirpation in Betaza
Between November 1702 and November 1704, Maldonado and his emissaries spread a clear and succinct message: each of the 104 communities in Villa Alta had to surrender specialists and implement local communal practices, or face severe punitive measures. The newly expanded range of these punishments had been richly illustrated by the spectacle of the decaying body parts of the Cajonos rebels along the road to Oaxaca. Toward the end of 1702, Maldonado himself brought his message to the towns of San Melchor Betaza and Santo Tomás Lachitla in Villa Alta. Betaza was a relatively large town, with an estimated population of 350 residents in 1703; the neighboring community of Lachitla shared numerous cultural and kinship links with Betaza and had an estimated population of only 128 individuals in 1704. It should be noted that, prior to 1704, the people of Betaza celebrated only eight Christian holidays per year under the supervision of a visiting priest.

In spite of Maldonado's visit, the townspeople of Betaza and Lachitla were not ready to renounce their communal ritual practices. According to Agustín Gonzalo Zárate, a former town official of Betaza in 1702—and the specialist whose arrest would trigger a revolt in this town—hardly a month had passed after the bishop's visit before the town engaged in another communal ritual celebration. Sometime during the next year, it was decided that the town would consult a realm that exceeded that of the powerful alcalde mayor in Villa Alta, as well as that of their enterprising but remote bishop. Through the mediation of ritual specialists who were experienced interpreters of the visions produced by cuana betao, the town of Betaza would ask its own local deity what would befall them. Two ritual specialists—Simón de Santiago and Nicolás de Espina Aracena—ingested cuana betao before the entire town, who awaited the response of the local deity assembled outside the Yau Yagto—a house that provided these specialists with the darkness and quiet required to communicate with the cuana betao entities. Both Santiago and Aracena reported having received the same premonition. Santiago, the eldest of the two, would later declare before the alcalde mayor that the deities of Betaza had revealed that they had fallen into the hands of God the Father [que ya habían dado en manos de Dios Padre] that the Christian doctrine would come into town, and that the Spaniards would come in and take away their parents and grandparents—meaning their idols. The first would be Guache Yagchila, and in fact, he was brought out and burned in the town square of [Villa Alta] later.

Santiago's elegiac tone was echoed by Espina Aracena, who confessed that the town deities had told them that "the law of their ancestors would be lost; the Spaniards will come and take away the things we have from our ancestors." Due to public concern about the bishop's visit, communal celebrations in Betaza were carried out only three times in 1703, as opposed to eight to ten times in the previous year. Although the trial records provide only fragmentary information about the rationale for these practices, it could be argued that these collective observances were linked to particular ritual observances in the 260-day Zapotec ritual calendar, and had as their main objective the propitiation of local deities in order to obtain good harvests and well being for the community. Later that year, visiting priest fray Francisco de Orozco came to ask the people of Betaza to surrender their ritual implements, but the townspeople denied having any. After this visit, Betaza's officials called a communal meeting, and discussed whether they would surrender their implements.
specialists, and calendrical texts. According to Agustín González Zárate, in spite of the fateful omens and mounting ecclesiastical pressure, the entire town decided not to yield to Maldonado’s order, and asserted that, rather than turn in their ritual implements, “they would first surrender and give up their own blood.”34

Following a pattern of intercommunity communication—a local diplomacy of sorts that was also pursued by rebel communities during the Tehuantepec (1660) and Cacuac (1712) rebellions, Betaza’s town council sent letters to neighboring towns informing them of their decision to resist Maldonado’s proclamation, and asking them for support. According to Juan Martín de Caballeros, Betaza’s governor, the council sent a letter asking the neighboring communities of Yaa, Yex, and Lachitaa not to break ranks with Betaza and not to turn in their idols or fruit stocks—which were used for the illegal production of alcoholic beverages—even if events led to a “great legal proceeding.”35

Idolaters Against the Alcalde Mayor: The Failure of Native Resistance in Betaza

The communal resolve of the inhabitants of Betaza and Lachitaa was tested by several incidents that occurred on December 17, 1703, during a local fair that took place in Yalilá, a town located a few kilometers to the south.36 In spite of their decision to resist Maldonado’s proclamation, Betaza’s town officials were apparently not concerned about any immediate consequences, for several of them went down to Yalilá’s fair. Among the crowds of outsiders who thronged in the town square, Bernardo García, a Spaniard from Villa Alta, recognized Agustín González Zárate, a ritual specialist from Betaza whose detention had been requested a short time earlier by Bishop Maldonado. Another visitor from Betaza was don Pedro de Paz, a former alcalde and gobernador who possessed such confidence about Betaza’s communal decision that he approached one of the regidores (councilmen) of Yalilá and scolded him by saying:

Perhaps the people of Yalilá are women, for do they not deserve to wear pants, and it would be better if they wore their women’s petticoats, or else why should they have turned in their idols without resistance? They should not have turned them in without fighting to the last drop of their blood.”

After this exchange, Yalilá’s governor, don Juan de la Cruz, referred to García, and arrested Zárate, Paz, and four other Betaza and Lachitaa officials who were at the fair. Initially, the people of Betaza seem to have interpreted these arrests as a direct attack on them from the community of Yalilá. In fact, upon learning of the detention of their husbands, some of the prisoners’ wives left Betaza with one of their alcaides in order to complain to the alcalde mayor that the officials of Yalilá had seized their husbands without justification.37 Shortly after his detention, Zárate was able to send a nephew back to Betaza with news about the arrests. Therefore, one of Yalilá’s couriers was detained in Betaza by an angry crowd, who placed him under detention. However, an anonymous informant from Betaza sent word to Diego Rivera y Cotes, alcalde mayor of Villa Alta, that a courier bearing a letter for him had been detained in his town. Since the courier bore a letter for the alcalde mayor, the people of Yeralia had gone beyond mere local conflict, and were now engaged in an act of disobedience against the provincial representative of the crown. Cotes immediately ordered his alcalde mayor to lead a force of sixteen men into Betaza in order to make inquiries. This small army retrieved both courier and letter, and escorted a group of Yalilá residents to the town of Villa Alta along with the five remaining prisoners from Betaza and Lachitaa, who were placed in the town’s jail along with Zárate, who arrived separately.

The decisive intervention of Cotes in Betaza seems to have defused Betaza’s planned resistance to idolatry extirpation campaigns. After the Christmas holidays, Cotes issued a formal order of arrest against eleven residents of Betaza and three men from Lachitaa, which included the people seized earlier in Yalilá. This order had the effect of discouraging any would-be revolt leaders, since it included all of the former elected office holders in Betaza and Lachitaa who, as ritual specialists, had orchestrated communal ritual practices in both towns during the previous decade. The arrested leaders from Betaza included Fabián de Vargas (a fiscal [church official] in 1705), don Pedro de Paz (former regidor, alcalde, and gobernador), Simón de Santiago El Tuerto (Betaza’s eldest specialist), Agustín González Zárate (a regidor in 1702), Joseph Bolaños (a former alcalde), Agustín Gutiérrez de Benito (the town’s escribano since circa 1680), Agustín González (an alcalde in 1693), Nicolás Martín (an alcalde in 1703), and Nicolás de Espina Aracena and Simón de Santiago (Betaza’s foremost cuauh beto drinkers). For Lachitaa, this list included Pedro Cano (a cuauh beto drinker), Nicolás de Celia (renowned specialist and a former fiscal, escribano, and maestro de doctrina [teacher of doctrine]), and Joseph de Celia (a beto, or ritual singer and musician, who had also been fiscal three times). On January 14, 1704, after a defense attorney was appointed to represent these thirteen defendants, a parade of witnesses began wending its way before Cotes. The defendants provided Cotes with detailed accounts about various subjects: communal decisions regarding Maldonado’s proclamation, the activities of past and present local “teachers of idolatry,” and, most importantly for Cotes, the financial measures that were taken by the community to fund clandestine ritual practices. The defendants’ declarations reflect a solid consensus on the identity of the most respected ritual specialists in Betaza: Simón de Santiago El Tuerto, Nicolás de Espina Aracena, Fabián de Vargas, and Nicolás Martín.

The Social and Financial Management of Communal Ritual Practices in Betaza

Communal ritual practices in native communities were a collective undertaking that was financed by both individual contributions and collective sources of revenue. Betaza was not an exception to this pattern, and it seems to have developed a parallel system in which various methods were used to collect funds for two distinct budgets, one for Christian devotional
practices, and the other for clandestine communal ritual practices. In Betaza, town officials took collections to satisfy the yearly demand for tribute to the crown. A group of twenty-four mayordomos—placed on a rotating basis—raised three pesos each in order to cover expenditures for the visiting priest and for the seven public Christian holidays that he led yearly. Additional funds for Christian celebrations were raised by the only religious confraternity in town, the Cofradía del Rosario. Then, whatever communal funds remained every year after satisfying the demands of the crown and the church were devoted to communal ritual expenses. The escribano Gutiérrez estimated that, every year, about 170 pesos of uncollected tribute to the crown remained in the town, along with about 27 pesos that remained from the collections taken to fund the visit of their priest. At least once, 25 pesos were appropriated from the budget of the Cofradía del Rosario for a non-Christian purpose: they were given as payment to Nicolás de Celis, Lachitza's foremost specialist, so that he would impart his knowledge of ritual practices to two Betaza men—Nicolás Martín and Nicolás de Espina Aracena. Joseph de Celis, Nicolás's brother, was a beato, and taught his ritual specialization to four Betaza residents: Gaspar Bautista, Fabián Luis, Joseph Luís, and Juan Gerónimo.

Gutiérrez, Vargas (who was a fiscal in 1703), and former alcalde Islasphes indicated two other methods for raising funds for communal ritual practices. The first one was an outright collection of between one or one and a half reales per household head, which was used to fund immediate expenditures.

The second one involved a set of communal obligations and money lending practices that mirrored the financial practices of indigenous sodalities in other native communities. Three mayordomos—Juan de Paz, Juan de Celia, and Agustín García—supervised the plowing of three land plots that corresponded to Betaza's three subdivisions, and kept three dwellings in which celebrants ate and drank after the communal celebrations. After the maize obtained from these plots was sold, profits were lent to people in the community at a high interest rate of 375 percent—or three reales for each peso that was borrowed. Through the accumulation of communal funds earmarked for communal ritual practices, the town had bought ten teams of oxen that were used primarily to plough the three land plots mentioned above. Moreover, in order to raise additional funds, these teams of oxen were also rented out for a daily rate of three reales.

The following deposition by Fabián de Vargas—son of a famous “teacher of idolatry” who owned transcriptions of ritual songs and was a respected ritual specialist himself—deserves to be quoted in extenso, as it depicts both the range of activities comprised in communal ritual practices and the various expenditures that were involved:

During the communal idolatries [the specialists] sacrifice two or three deer, and many turkeys and puppies, and they make the men fast and avoid their wives for thirteen days, and during this time, rather than going to the steam baths, they bathe in the river at the cock's first or second crow. They confess with the priests before the sacrifices, bringing each a real or a real and a half. In order to receive these reales, the regidores are present there, and the amount they should bring is determined beforehand by the town council, the escribano, and the other priests. They also bring four young boys to these communal sacrifices: these boys behead the turkeys and the dogs, and open the deer chests while the priests hold these animals. In a piece of paper made from tree bark, they pour [the animals'] blood; then, everyone comes in, gets on their knees, and over the bloodied paper, they toss a bit of ground tobacco called pitieites, which each Indian carries in a little pouch. . .

After making those sacrifices, the alcalde purchases some thin candles from the money that remains, and place them on the altars at the church, and then they order people to sing a litany. A large feather that adorns the images of Our Lady is taken to the sacrifices, and the person who plays the teponaxlli and sings diabolic songs wears it on his head. . . During the sacrifices, they post guards in various places, so they may give a warning if they see a Spaniard or any suspicious person.

Although the vocabulary of the court interpreter has reduced the original Zapotec terms to routine Christian designations—such as “priests” or “diabolic songs”—this description depicts the entire town council at work, orchestrating collective ritual action, receiving individual contributions, and participating in these ritual practices. While an outsider might fall into the temptation of designating these practices as a hybrid mixture of Christian and native practices, the attitude of the celebrants is rather clear: they were conceived by the town as collective religious practices that were essential to the communal identity and well being of Betaza. Therefore, they were practiced clandestinely and under the potential risk of discovery by outsiders. From a local perspective, these practices belonged in a communal realm that was kept relatively separate in spatial, budgetary, and social terms from local public Christian celebrations.

Conclusions

How may one explain the fact that native resistance in Betaza did not lead to a violent confrontation with colonial authorities, as had occurred in Cajones three years earlier? Other than assuming that mere fright convinced the Betazanos to yield, one could propose that Betaza's town council misinterpreted the arrest of their specialists at the Yahklag fair: based on previous experience, they did not expect a neighboring native community to take the side of idolatry extirpators, and they believed that the arrests were a collective act of aggression on the part of Yahklag. When a small army arrived from Villa Alta making inquiries, it was too late to organize armed resistance, and the town officials and leading ritual specialists had little choice but to surrender to the powerful aiguací mayor Joseph de la Sierra. At this point, Betaza's fight against extirpation was a losing proposition in both ideological and political terms: Betaza's neighbors had
not pursued the path of resistance that they had vowed to support through their clandestine correspondence, and Betasa’s neighbors seemed ready to accept Maldonado’s offer of amnesty rather than risk another rebellion. Betasa’s former elected officials had concluded that rebellion was not in the cards, and thus yielded easily to Cota’s questions about their communal ritual practices, allowing an exceptionally detailed description of the social organization of clandestine ritual practices in a native community in New Spain to be inscribed in the legal record.

The 1703-1704 Betasa idolatry trial provides us with a richly detailed perspective into the local reformulation of a prescriptive political system that was imposed by the colonial regime. Betasa’s councilmen reassessed the obligations and faculties of their posts as alcaldes, escribano, and regidores in order to reproduce a separate social and economic realm for collective ritual practices. It would be misleading to simply label these practices as clandestine; from the perspective of Betasa’s residents, they were both public and collective exercises, but they were clandestine and illegitimate from the extirpators’ perspective. In the manner of other native officials—most notably, the church officials of San Miguel Sola who circulated copies of the 256-day Zapotec ritual calendar among a network of at least thirty-five text users and specialists—Betasa’s town officials led a dual existence as leading members of their town council and as ritual specialists who participated in collective and private ritual practices. As in Sola, this attempt to reproduce a position of authority in both a legitimate political sphere and in a clandestine realm for local ritual practices was eventually suppressed by the colonial authorities.

We should not assume, in spite of the town officials’ claims about local consensus, that the people of Betasa uniformly embraced this dual system and offered unconditional support for an agenda of defiance. It is more appropriate to interpret the local arrangements on behalf of traditional ritual practices as a project that was embraced by a particular faction of town officials. In fact, there exists evidence of local resistance to the policies set forth by town officials. On February 4, 1704, a few weeks after the interrogation of Betasa’s officials began in Villa Alta, the vicar of Betasa, fray Joseph Cardona, celebrated mass and pronounced a communal absolution from idolatry over the entire town. However, the town authorities—which seem to have had a clear picture of who had supported them and who had collaborated with the priests—punished some of the inhabitants whom they regarded as traitors the day after Cardona’s absolution. Betasa resident Juan Mateo would report that he was intercepted as he walked down the street by a man called Juan Luis, who assaulted him, accusing him of betrayal to the people of Betasa. At that point, Betasa’s alcalde incarcerated him and accused him of having gone to Villa Alta to give accounts about their customs, and had him tied to the pillory and whipped several times. Before being released, he was ordered to pay a five-peso fine.

In their attempts to reassess local political offices, the people of Betasa, Lachitana, and Yalalag attempted to profit from a de jure separation between indigenous and nonindigenous subjects: as native subjects, they endeavored to maintain a dual system of public religious practices that would only be viable in a relatively isolated indigenous community. The social reproduction of a dual system in these communities was facilitated by their geographic isolation and by the laxity of the evangelization policies that were pursued by Dominicans and secular priests in the area during the first half of the seventeenth century. However, during the second half of the seventeenth century, two policy changes began to have substantial effects in Villa Alta. On the one hand, two activist bishops—Saritana and Maldonado—embraced a more severe set of legal measures and punitive efforts against alleged idolaters; on the other, the office of the alcaldes mayor in Villa Alta expanded its reach into idolatry extirpation measures, and increased its economic and political impact among natives through a greater control of policies that appropriated goods and labor in native communities. In the most terrible of ways, local Zapotec deities had the last word. When Betasa’s ritual specialists consulted their local deities through the mediation of hallucinogens, they understood that the time of the Spaniards and God the Father—a second civil and ecclesiastical conquest in the slowly unfolding cycle of colonial evangelization projects—had finally arrived in the isolated mountain ranges of Villa Alta.

NOTES

The abbreviations used in this essay are as follows:

AGT: Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain
AGN: Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico
AGP: Archivo General de los Estados y Provincias, Mexico
AIAH: Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Oaxaca, Mexico
AIC: Archivo del Lic. Luis Castellanos, Oaxaca, Mexico
ANSM: Archivo de Nuestra Señora de la Merced, Oaxaca, Mexico
ANO: Archivo de Notarios de Oaxaca, Mexico
ATEP: Archivo Eclesiástico de Teopanzolco, Oaxaca, Mexico
AYA: Archivo de la Vicaría de Oaxaca, Mexico

1. Although a strong local historical tradition—which Archbishop Gillow embraced during his 1809 inquiry into the Cajonos revolt—identified don Juan Baustría and Jacinto de los Ángeles as native facilitors, neither of them was designated with this title in the 1700-1702 Cajonos trial documents. While they both acted in the stead of conscientious informants, they did not seem to hold such titles in September 1700. It should be noted that the Catholic Church proclaimed them as blessed in the summer of 2007.

2. ANSM, Méritos de Cajonos, AIC, 1710, 1697-1697; AIAH, Méritos de Cajonos, 5-6, 615-30; Elogio de Gillow, Apuntes históricos sobre la idolatría e introducción del cristianismo en Oaxaca (México: Ediciones Toledo, [1889] 1900), 172-81.


4. See Steve J. Stern, "New Approaches to the

6. The most extensive analysis of the 1660 Tlacotepec rebellion to date is in Héctor Díaz-Polanco et al., El juego de la involución. Autonomía y rebeldía indígena en el chispacto de Oaxaca (México: CIESAS, 1996).

7. Reporte was the appropriation of local rice and manufactured goods by colonial authorities through a mandatory exchange for goods manufactured elsewhere that natives did not need, and at unfavorable exchange rates. Alcaldes mayores manipulated these rates to their own advantage. See Chance, Las Coquinas del Sierra.


9. Díaz-Polanco et al., El juego de la involución.


11. AGI Mexico 681, 682.

12. AGI México 680. Maldonado's institutional proposals for addressing widespread indigeneity went beyond ecclesiastical reforms. Both Maldonado and the alcaldé mayor Rivera y Cotes presented the crown with the ambitious suggestion of congregating all the towns in Villa Alta into groups of five hundred married couples; they also recommended appointing Spanish language teachers in each town, as well as allowing the alcaldé mayor to name local representatives as he saw fit, see AGI Mexico 682. As Chance (Las Coquinas del Sierra) notes, many natives opposed these proposals, and there is no extant evidence that these congregaciones were carried through. Native resistance to this measure was so great that some towns offered large bribes to the alcaldé mayor if he decided to carry out congregaciones.

13. AGI Mexico 675.

14. Ibid.

15. AGI Mexico 680.

16. This vivid detail was provided in a report to the crown written circa 1710 against Maldonado by Antonio de Torres, procurator general of the Dominican Order in Oaxaca, found in AGI Mexico 681. Although Maldonado wrote a point-by-point rebuttal of this report, he remained suspiciously silent on the subject of this matter of particular controversy.

17. AGI Mexico 679, 682.

18. AGI Mexico 681.

19. AGI Mexico 680.


ongoing translation project led by the author that focuses on the Zapotec ritual corpus seized during Maldonado's campaign (AGI 881, Calendarios 100-102) has confirmed that a subset of these songs celebrated Coaque Yagualita and other local deities.

29. AVA Criminal 117–17v.
30. Ibid., 60v.
31. Ibid., 24 r-v.
32. Ibid., 60v.
33. Yaláp held an important place among the Zapotec communities of southern Villa Alta due to three factors: its role as a regional market hub, its location on the trade route between Oaxaca and the cabeceras of Villa Alta, and its position as the largest town in southern Villa Alta with an estimated population of 1,577 residents in 1790. See Chacon, The Conquest, 49.
34. AVA Criminal 117–9r.
35. Although the extant records do not indicate the existence of conflicting claims over the surrounding lands and forests between Yaláp and Beca during this period, Beca and Lachitla seem to have had land conflicts with their northern neighbor of San Andrés Yau; see AVA Criminal 107.
36. AVA Criminal 117–7v.
37. Ibid., 28v.
38. Ibid., 27v–49v.
39. Central Mexican indigenous societies routinely constituted themselves as productive and money-lending enterprises. A particularly well-documented operation during the 1760s in the Nahua community of Tlapa in what is now central Guerrero is described in Danieke Dalgado, "The 'Money of the Saints': Ceremonial Organization and Monetary Capital in Tlapa, Guerrero, Mexico," in Manipulating the Saints, ed. A. Meyers and D. E. Hopkins, 149–54 (Hamburg: WYASBAH, 1988). In Tlapa, the "money of the saint"—a collective fund raised by pooling monetary contributions from cofradía members—was used as a source of revenue for the cult of the saint. Both members and nonmembers of the cofradía borrowed amounts from this fund at various rates of interest that ranged from 25 to 50, and even to 100 percent, provided that both principal and interest were returned by the year's end.
41. Ibid., 27v.
42. Ibid., 165–6v.
45. AVA Criminal 117–3r.

PART TWO

NATIVE SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIAN MORALITY

The carnal woman is an evil woman who finds pleasure in her body... . She consumes her inner substance—a brazen, a proud, a dissolute woman of debauched life... . She parade[s], she moves lasciviously; she is pompous.
—Francisco de Sahagún, c. 1577

The worst thing that he did was that he came into my house four times, trying to take my wife by force in order to sow sin [fornication] with her. He desired this, but he did not fulfill his desire.
—Diego Poz, notary, Tábil, Yucatan, late sixteenth century

Tuesday, 6 November [1658], at eleven in the morning they took fifteen men from the Royal Court jail in order to burn fourteen of them, and one, because he was a boy, they gave him two hundred lashes and sold him to a morrero for six years. all for having committed the sin of sodomy among themselves for many years.
—Gregorio Martín de Guijo, 1658

In that time there will be lies and madness, and also lust and fornication...
—Chilam Balam of Chumayel

I deny all of this, and I believe that no good Christian person, much less a priest, could do such a thing...
—Padre Cristobal de Valencia, 1609

Once Pope Alexander VI granted the Patronato Real to Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabel in 1494, all of Spain's dominions were destined to be Christian and subject to their patronage. The crown's ministers to the colonies were reform-minded but steeped in medieval theological