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Interpreting colonialism

Edited by

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and

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SVEC

2004:09

VOLTAIRE FOUNDATION

OXFORD

2004

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ISBN 0 7294 0845 0
ISSN 0435-2866

Voltaire Foundation
99 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 6JX, UK

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

The correct reference for this volume is
SVEC 2004:09

This series is available on annual subscription

For further information about *SVEC*
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This book is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset in Baskerville by Alden Bookset
Printed and bound by Polestar Scientifica Ltd

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to those who made the seminar and this volume possible. Peter Reill, director of the Center for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century studies and of the William Andrews Clark memorial library at UCLA, provided invaluable organisational and material support for the seminar. Tom Crow, director of the Getty research institute, and Robert Ritchie, director of research at the Huntington library, hosted the seminar at their respective institutions as well. We are also thankful to the American society for eighteenth-century studies and the International society for eighteenth-century studies for their financial contributions, and to Vickie Cutting for managing many of the preparatory logistical details from the ASECS business office and for her editorial work. Finally, our sincere thanks go to the Voltaire Foundation for its enthusiasm for the project.

DAVID EDUARDO TAVÁREZ

Colonial evangelisation and native resistance:
the interplay of native political autonomy
and ritual practices in Villa Alta
(New Spain), 1700-1704*

i. Introduction

ON 14 September 1700, a momentous confrontation between members of a native community and local representatives of the colonial Christian order took place in the town of San Francisco Cajonos, located in the Oaxacan district of Villa Alta.¹ Late at night, following a timely tip given by Don Juan Bautista (a former *fiscal*, a native official who supervised local worship) and Jacinto de los Angeles, and another Dominican, caught many of the inhabitants of San Francisco Cajonos engaging in a communal ritual act in the house of Pedro Flores, the head of the only confraternity in town. Flores' guests had sacrificed some fowl and a doe, and were repeating some prayers in Zapotec before images of Christian saints, placed face down upon a table, under a few bowls filled with blood. The celebrants fled the house, leaving the friars to inspect with indignation the remains of the sacrificed animals. The next day, an enraged crowd surrounded the Dominican compound, and forced the friars to hand over the two native officials. According to later testimony, they were beaten, taunted and executed, and their hearts were ripped out and thrown to the dogs. The *alcalde mayor* of Villa Alta immediately began an investigation into the fate of the loyal *fiscales*; initially, it was claimed that they had fled the area, but after the imprisonment and interrogation of the revolt's leaders, the *alcalde mayor* Mier y Tojo extracted a confession.

* I would like to thank Susan Schroeder, Thomas Smith-Stark, Philip Stewart, Byron Wells, and the participants of the 2000 International seminar on the eighteenth century, for their comments and suggestions about this essay. It should be noted that all the translations of Spanish and Zapotec texts quoted here are my own.

1. Villa Alta was a colonial jurisdiction located to the north-east of the Oaxaca Valley, administered by an *alcalde mayor* (regional governor) in the town of San Ildefonso. It encompassed 104 towns inhabited by speakers of Cajonos, Nexito and Bixanos Zapotec, Chinantec, and Mixe. San Ildefonso became the administrative centre for the indigenous communities located in the mountainous areas near the former Zapotec polities of Guaspaltepec, Xaltepec, and Nanacatepec (Peter Gerhard, *A Guide to the historical geography of New Spain*, Norman, OK 1972, p.369). Villa Alta's geography is dominated by a mountain landscape, and human settlements have traditionally been dispersed throughout valleys and piedmonts.

After a protracted trial which required legal consultations with the Viceroy, Mier y Tojo's suggestion of an exemplary punishment was approved. Fifteen of the Cajonos rebels were hanged and quartered in January 1702, and their remains were exhibited in San Francisco Cajonos and along the main road to Oaxaca.²

Throughout the colonial period, indigenous rebellions in Central Mexico were infrequent, short-lived, and limited to local geographical contexts.³ In fact, the outbreak in Cajonos seems a mere flare-up when compared with the Zapotec rebellion of Tehuantepec in 1660, the Tzeltal rebellion of Cancuc in 1712, or the Yucatec rebellion of Cisteil in 1761, to cite three well-known rebellions in colonial Mexico in which native conceptions of local autonomy and local ritual practices played a leading role.⁴ How may one posit an interpretation of these native rebellions against colonial rule, which apparently were driven by ideological or religious concerns? One possibility is to embrace E. P. Thompson's well-known model of a peasant 'moral economy', which argues that peasant or native populations may rise up against their government once the traditionally accepted boundaries of economic and political subjugation are trespassed by government officials.⁵ This model stresses one crucial similarity among rebelling colonial subjects and peasants – the fact that their resentment with the current order has reached a stage in which they

2. Eulogio Gillow, *Apuntes históricos sobre la idolatría e introducción del cristianismo en Oaxaca* (Graz 1988), p.109-15; Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Oaxaca, Mexico (AHAO) and Archivo de Nuestra Señora de la Merced, Oaxaca, Mexico (ANSM), originals and 1889 transcription of Archivo Judicial de Villa Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico (henceforward AVA), *Autos y diligencias sobre el tumulto en San Francisco Cajonos, 1700-1702*.

3. An early, brutal descent of the indigenous population of Central Mexico may have been a major initial factor in weakening organised indigenous responses to native political domination under colonial rule (see Friedrich Katz, 'Rural uprisings in pre-conquest and colonial Mexico', in *Riot, rebellion, and revolution*, ed. F. Katz, Princeton, NJ 1988). Widespread epidemics affected Central Mexican populations in 1542-1545, the early 1570s and the 1590s, bringing population levels down to about 12 to 18 per cent of pre-conquest estimates, according to two conservative figures (see William T. Sanders, 'The population of the Central Mexican symbiotic region, the Basin of Mexico and the Teotihuacán Valley in the sixteenth century', in *The Native population of the Americas in 1492*, ed. W. M. Denevan, Madison, WI 1976, p.85-150; Thomas Whitmore, *Disease and death in early colonial Mexico: simulating Amerindian depopulation*, Boulder, CO 1992). A modest demographic recovery would not take root before the early eighteenth century (see Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow W. Borah, *Essays in population history: Mexico and California*, vol.iii, Berkeley, CA 1979).

4. For Tehuantepec, see Héctor Díaz-Polanco et al., ed., *El Fuego de la inobediencia: autonomía y rebelión india en el obispado de Oaxaca* (Mexico City 1996); for Cancuc, see Kevin Gosner, *Soldiers of the Virgin: the moral economy of a colonial Maya rebellion* (Tucson, AZ 1992), and Juan Pedro Viqueira, *Indios rebeldes e idolatras: dos ensayos históricos sobre la rebelión india de Cancuc, Chiapas, acaecida en el año de 1712* (Mexico 1997); for Cisteil, see Robert W. Patch, 'Culture, community and "rebellion" in the Yucatec Maya uprising of 1761', in *Native resistance and the Pax Colonial in New Spain*, ed. S. Schroeder (Lincoln, NE 1998), p.67-83.

5. See E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past and present* 50 (1971), p.76-136. In *Soldiers of the Virgin*, Gosner embraced this model, an example followed by Patch in 'Culture, community and "rebellion"'.

are willing to risk their life and livelihood to fight for social change – as it dilutes the specific (and highly variable) social and cultural categories deployed by various peasant or native actors in order to constitute (or reformulate) notions of communal identity. To echo Steven Stern, peasant and native consciousness formation and deployment is problematic, rather than predictable, and an analysis of local cultural history, rather than an omniscient behavioural model, is essential for a thorough understanding of peasant and native rebellions.⁶

Seizing the opportunity posed by an outstanding set of trial records, this essay explores the defence of native local autonomy in two Zapotec towns in the Oaxacan region of Villa Alta in New Spain during the early eighteenth century. Rather than reducing these events to an inventory of economic or political factors, it depicts the collective consciousness of Zapotec office-holders in action as they endeavour to defend a local notion of autonomy from the Spanish crown and the Catholic church. Departing from a description of a prescriptive notion of native autonomy, which was advocated by the colonial legal system, this essay illustrates how the elected officials of the towns of Betaza and Lachitaa deployed these received notions in a local context in order to exercise a local notion of autonomy supported by public engagement in collective ritual practices, which were seen as idolatrous by the colonial church. After a brief portrayal of prescriptive notions of native autonomy in New Spain, and the historical context for local revolts in early eighteenth-century Villa Alta, I analyse the attempts of these two native town councils to preserve their local autonomy over two parallel realms of ritual practice: one Christian and official, and the other local, native and collective.

ii. From native communities to *pueblos de indios* in New Spain

In the late post-classic era (c.1200-1519), the political organisation of Central Mexican native communities was based on a concept of polity that comprised traditional lineages and land-holding rights for each community, and the public worship of local deities and celebration of calendrical holidays. Each community had a hereditary ruler, and communities often formed a loose confederation with a defined territory and agreements for the rotation or sharing of political leadership among members.⁷ After the conquest, the Spanish crown had to contend with

6. Steve J. Stern, ed., *Resistance, rebellion and consciousness in the Andean peasant world* (Madison, WI 1987), p.15. In Kevin Gosner, 'Religion and rebellion in colonial Chiapas', in *Native resistance and the Pax Colonial in New Spain*, ed. S. Schroeder (Lincoln, NE 1998) (p.47-66), Gosner presents a careful assessment of the complexity of the various forms of native cultural consciousness that informed the 1712 Cancuc rebellion.

7. For the Mexica, see Frances Berdan and Elizabeth Boone, ed., *Aztec imperial strategies* (Washington DC 1996), and *Native resistance*, ed. Schroeder. For the Zapotec and Mixtec,

traditional notions of rulership. Thus, it allowed for the appointment of 'natural lords' (lineage rulers) as both native rulers and holders of a colonial office in New Spain. This duality was reflected in the designation of a local ruler as *cacique* (native ruler) and *gobernador* (governor). For the most part, the crown did not interfere directly with the election of native rulers for the first two generations after the conquest; however, it prepared the ground for their demise.⁸ The crown seized the initiative at times of inheritance crises, and inserted non-elite members and even outsiders into the local sphere as *gobernadores*, thus separating political authority from the office of the native ruler.⁹

Historian David Brading has remarked that, in his 1516 *Memorial*, Bartolomé de las Casas presciently argued for the major social and political features that came to characterise the *pueblo de indios* (town of Indians) as a prescriptive colonial project: segregated indigenous villages directly controlled by crown officials, with a church and a hospital managed by a priest, and a population subject to rotating labour obligations related to labour-intensive colonial enterprises, such as mining and manufacture, and to community needs.¹⁰ To this framework, one should add land tenure laws restricting the sale of indigenous communal or private land to non-Indians. The Indian community could be a *cabecera de doctrina* (the head of the smallest colonial administrative unit) or a *sujeto* (a dependency). *Cabeceras de doctrina* had a resident priest who managed the doctrinal education, mass and public registers and visited the *sujetos* periodically.

In most indigenous communities, sociopolitical stratification existed within two community domains, the local church and the local government, and sometimes within a third domain, the *cofradía*, or religious confraternity, linked to but independent from the church. The top tier in each of these domains was controlled in theory by colonial authorities. Every year (and in rare cases, every other year) Indians elected local

see Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, ed., *The Cloud people: divergent evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations* (New York 1983), and Ronald Spores, 'Differential response to colonial control among the Mixtecs and Zapotecs of Oaxaca' in Schroeder, *Native resistance*.

8. For a careful analysis of the legal development of the *república de indios* (the political and legal domain of native populations in Spanish America), see Magnus Mörner, *La Corona española y los foráneos en los pueblos de indios de América* Instituto de Estudios Ibero-Americanos, Serie A, Monografía 1 (Stockholm 1970). A synthesis appears in David Tavárez, 'República de Indios', in *Encyclopedia of Mexico: history, society, and culture* (Chicago 1997), i.1255-59.

9. Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish rule* (Stanford, CA 1964), p.168. The actual date of rupture with the lineage ruler varies with the region; it occurred in 1564 in Texcoco, around 1560 in Pátzcuaro and by 1560 in the Toluca valley (Margarita Menegus-Bornemann, *Del Señorío a la República de Indios: el caso de Toluca, 1500-1600*, Madrid 1991, p.95-96), and starting from 1579 in Central Yucatán (Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya society under colonial rule*, Princeton, NJ 1984, p.243).

10. David Brading, *The First America: the Spanish monarchy, creole patriots, and the liberal state, 1492-1867* (Cambridge 1991), p.60.

officers to serve in their town's *cabildo* (city council): two *alcaldes* (mayors), about four *regidores* (council members), and an *escribano* (secretary). These positions were rotated among males who wanted to increase their social standing; however, the amount of personal resources required for these offices acted as a deterrent to overburdened commoners.¹¹ The lowest tier in the political and religious domains featured a number of *alguaciles*, *topiles*, *sacristanes* and *fiscales* who were in charge of tax collection, the organisation of crews for the labour taxes, edict proclamations, and Christian celebrations.

It should be stressed that, in Spanish America, natives were accorded a separate legal status from that of other subjects of the crown. In the early sixteenth century, before the formalisation of dual legal spheres for Indians and Spaniards, Spanish law treated Indians as jurisdictional subjects: they filed suits in the Royal *Audiencia*, and were tried and punished for idolatry and sorcery by apostolic inquisitors (Greenleaf, *Inquisición y sociedad en el México colonial*). When a separate Inquisition tribunal was established in Mexico in 1571, Indians were excluded from its jurisdiction, and the investigation of their crimes against the faith, a long list that included idolatry, sorcery, bigamy, and the refusal to tithe, fell upon the shoulders of the bishop or archbishop in each ecclesiastical jurisdiction, who was assisted in these tasks by the *Provisor* of Indians, the main ecclesiastical prosecutor. Bishops delegated jurisdictional faculties to a select number of parish priests and friars, who acted against native suspects of idolatry and sorcery as ecclesiastical judges.¹²

iii. Idolatry extirpation campaigns and native revolts in seventeenth-century Oaxaca

The indigenous rebellion of Tehuantepec in 1660 marks the beginning of a period of confrontations and tense impasses between native communities and ecclesiastical and civil authorities in both Villa Alta and the Isthmus area in Oaxaca. On 22 March 1660, a large group of Zapotecs 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 neighbouring 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 Zapotecs of Nexapa also rose up in arms, forcing a military standoff

11. Farriss, *Maya society under colonial rule*, p.234, 238; Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish rule*, p.175-76.

12. See Viqueira, *Indios rebeldes*; Tavárez, 'La idolatría letrada: un análisis comparativo de textos clandestinos rituales y devocionales en comunidades nahuas y zapotecas, 1613-1654', *Historia Mexicana* 49 (1999), p.197-252.

resolved only through the mediation of Bishop Cueva y Dávalos. During 1660 and 1661, the rebellion spread like wildfire, to use its chroniclers' simile of choice, through several Chontal, Huave, Mixe, Zapotec and Zoque communities.

In comparison with other indigenous rebellions, this sequence of events occupies a unique place in colonial Mexican historiography due to its multi-ethnic character and its sudden expansion over a large swath of Oaxaca. What motivated native peoples from linguistically and culturally diverse communities to rise up against Spanish rule? There are two complementary analyses of the motivations for this movement.¹³ One analytical view, espoused by Díaz-Polanco, Burguete, and Sánchez, rehearses a cumulative theory: taxation abuses related to the *repartimientos*,¹⁴ followed by the punishment and humiliation of recalcitrant native elites, may have provided a spark for the Tehuantepec rebellion. On the other hand, Carmagnani stresses the symbolic use of social space by native rebels and colonial officials, and emphasises 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 community identity in seventeenth-century Oaxaca.

A development in the late seventeenth century confirms Carmagnani's hypothesis about the expanding powers of *alcaldes mayores* in Oaxaca: between 1665 and 1736 the *alcaldes mayores* of Villa Alta presided over at least a dozen trials against Indians accused of engaging in idolatry or sorcery.¹⁵ 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. But it appears that both Bishop Monterroso (who was in office between 1665 and 1678) and Del Puerto (who served from 1679 to 1681) valued the co-operation of civil authorities in inaccessible regions regarded as prone to rebellion, as it was the case in Villa Alta.¹⁶ It is in fact during

13. Both of these views appear in a recent collection devoted to this rebellion (Díaz-Polanco *et al.*, *El Fuego*).

14. *Repartimientos* were the appropriation of local raw and manufactured goods by colonial authorities through a mandatory exchange for goods manufactured elsewhere that natives did not need, at unfavourable exchange ratios. *Alcaldes mayores* manipulated these ratios for their own advantage (see Spores, 'Differential response'; John K. Chance, *The Conquest of the Sierra*, Norman, OK 1989).

15. This is only the number of known extant trial records; the total was probably much greater. One should not forget that Villa Alta's *alcalde mayor* exercised considerable economic and political power; in the 1660s, this was regarded as the most lucrative political office in all of Oaxaca (Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain, henceforward AGI, Mexico 357, Bishop to the crown, 1663).

16. Under Monterroso's watch, at least four idolatry trials involving fifteen defendants were instructed by the *alcaldes mayores* of Villa Alta (AVA Criminal 19, 22, 23, and 25). Del Puerto singled out Cristóbal Del Castillo, *alcalde mayor* of Villa Alta, as a zealous assistant in the fight against idolatry in the region of Cajonos.

Del Puerto's brief tenure as bishop that the six towns in the Cajonos region – San Francisco, San Mateo, San Pedro, Santo Domingo, San Pablo, and San Miguel – begin to loom large as strongholds of idolatry in the consciousness of the extirpators.¹⁷ In a 1679 letter to Charles II of Spain (AGI Mexico 357), 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.¹⁸ Del Puerto had these specialists imprisoned in the royal jail of Oaxaca City, intending to exile them permanently from their native communities.

Isidro Sariñana, 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 *prisión perpetua de idólatras*.¹⁹ After arguing that such a prison was required to curb native idolatry, Sariñana obtained a grant of 3000 *pesos de oro* from the crown for the project, and began building this prison only a few streets west of the cathedral, announcing its completion in a 1692 letter to the crown (AGI Mexico 357). But Sariñana's brand-new 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 its 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 Friar Angel Maldonado, who occupied the episcopal seat between 1702 and 1728, abandoned it in order to establish a new prison in a different area of Oaxaca City. After the fleeting four-month tenure of Friar Manuel de Quiroz, Sariñana's successor, Bishop Maldonado inherited Sariñana's punitive project, and turned it into one

17. The Dominican friar Pedro Guerrero began a systematic extirpation campaign in the region in 1560, when he convinced many natives to turn in their cult effigies through indiscriminate use of the whip, which motivated the suicide of a ritual specialist in Tabaa (AGI Mexico 358, exp. 3 bis). Dominican punitive measures in Villa Alta, Tetiquipa, and the Mixteca motivated the censure of the crown and the *Audiencia* of Mexico in 1562 (AGI Mexico 336A), and again in 1576 (AGI Mexico 69, Ramo 4, no. 47), when Bishop Friar Bernardino de Albuquerque continued to allow Dominican vicars to punish idolaters.

18. AGI Mexico 357. Unfortunately, the records of the Cajonos trials, which Del Puerto mentions in his letter, have not survived.

19. Bishop Sariñana (1683-1696), may have been inspired by inquisitorial precedent. In Mexico City, the Holy Office erected a 'perpetual prison' for proselytising Jews and Christian heretics in the early seventeenth century (see Solange Alberro, *Inquisición y sociedad en México, 1571-1700*, Mexico 1988, p.203-205). In the Archbishopric of Lima, a prison for idolaters called Casa de Santa Cruz was finished in 1618, and ceased to exist before 1639; its inmates were to remain imprisoned for unspecified periods of time, earning a living by weaving textiles (Iris Gareis, 'Repression and cultural change: the "extirpation of idolatry" in colonial Peru', in *Spiritual encounters* ed. N. Griffiths and F. Cervantes, p.234).

of the supporting pillars of the exacting extirpation campaigns he carried out in Villa Alta in the first decade of the eighteenth century.²⁰

Throughout the seventeenth century, the Dominicans of Villa Alta confronted three major challenges: the scarcity of doctrinal literature written in the local Cajonos and Nextizo Zapotec variants, the small number of resident priests, and the geographical and pragmatic difficulties of making regular visits to all the communities assigned to each main town with a resident minister. In spite of the establishment of six Dominican *cabeceras de doctrina* with resident ministers between 1570 and 1623, Villa Alta had only one secular curate until these districts were secularised due to the lobbying of bishop Maldonado in the early eighteenth century. In fact, Maldonado's rediscovery of idolatries in 1702 was a powerful argument in his successful drive to secularise these and other Dominican parishes.

iv. Communal ritual and local autonomy: Betaza and Lachitaa versus the colonial order

a. Maldonado's innovative extirpation campaign in Villa Alta, 1702-1704

The revolt in San Francisco Cajonos described at the beginning of this essay took place while the bishopric's seat was vacant; consequently, the *alcalde mayor* of Villa Alta enjoyed an unusually large degree of political latitude for suppressing the revolt in his own terms. When Bishop Maldonado assumed his office in 1702, he obtained the commutation of the death sentence handed to seventeen other rebels from Cajonos, and made two visits to Villa Alta.²¹ During these inspections, Maldonado discovered that the idolaters of this region were not only rebellious, but also highly accomplished authors of clandestine ritual texts. Maldonado sent Joseph de Aragón y Alcántara, an experienced visiting ecclesiastic judge who had tried idolaters in Ejutla, to Villa Alta to record and receive the collective confessions of all the towns in the region. Following co-operation guidelines that had been established earlier between the bishopric and Villa Alta, Diego de Rivera y Cotes, *alcalde mayor* of Villa

20. In August 1703, the Procurator General of the Dominican province of Oaxaca granted Maldonado a plot of land by the orchard of the main Dominican convent, with the proviso that the land would revert to his order if it ceased to be used for the prison of idolaters that Maldonado erected there (Archivo de Notarías de Oaxaca, Mexico, Escribano Benaías 1703).

21. A quick consideration of the colonial economy of punishment suggests that the execution of fifteen of the Cajonos rebels constituted a severe and unusual degree of punishment. After the 1660 Tehuantepec rebellion was over, only two natives were sentenced to death (Spores, *Differential response*, p.41). Moreover, while the 1761 Cisteil rebellion was suppressed without mercy – resulting in the death of about five hundred Yucatec combatants – only nine of the hundreds of rebels were sentenced to death (Patch, 'Culture, community', p.79).

Alta, assisted Maldonado and Aragón y Alcántara during their visits, and turned over the testimonies of about forty-five 'teachers of idolatry' who had been imprisoned in the royal jail of Villa Alta (AGI Mexico 882, 296r-391v). Furthermore, Maldonado placed his pectoral on the neck of a reformed idolater, who travelled through various Villa Alta towns announcing the clemency of his bishop.²²

Maldonado's offer of mercy, coupled with the fresh memory of the exemplary punishment that had been visited upon the Cajonos rebels, convinced many residents of Villa Alta communities to denounce their ritual specialists, and to turn in the clandestine ritual texts which several generations of extirpators had called 'books of the Devil'. Through this innovative extirpation strategy, Maldonado harvested ninety-nine manuscript versions of the *piyè* (the Zapotec 260-day ritual calendar²³), and more than thirty Zapotec ritual songs, which had been composed to be performed during communal ritual practices to the beat of a cylindrical drum called *nicachi* in Zapotec, and *teponaztli* in Nahuatl.²⁴ At the request of Maldonado, the elected authorities of more than one hundred Zapotec and Mixe communities journeyed to Villa Alta and made a communal confession or petition for mercy before Judge Aragón y Alcántara in 1704 and 1705 in order to benefit from the offer of amnesty that had been extended to their communities as a whole. On the last evening of 1704, Maldonado granted his general pardon to the native authorities who had journeyed to the town of Villa Alta.

b. From omens to local diplomacy: communal resistance to idolatry extirpation in Betaza

Throughout 1702 and 1703, Maldonado and his emissaries spread a clear and succinct message: each community had to surrender specialists and implements linked to local communal practices, or face severe punitive

22. AGI Mexico 880. This vivid detail was provided in a report to the crown against Maldonado written by Friar Antonio de Torres, Procurator General of the Dominican Order in Oaxaca. Although Maldonado wrote a point-by-point rebuttal of this report, he remained suspiciously silent on the subject of this most peculiar emissary.

23. Mesoamerican civilisations employed calendrical systems that had a common historical origin. The Zapotec used a 260-day count, which was subdivided into twenty periods of thirteen days each. Each day in this count had a unique name that was composed of prefixes and suffixes combined according to a logic that remains obscure. Ritual specialists used calendrical information to establish what were the most propitious days for certain activities. This ritual count was independent from the solar year calendar of 365 days. For an overview of Mesoamerican calendrical systems, see José Alcina Franch, *Calendario y religión entre los zapotecos* (Mexico 1993), and Munro Edmonson, *The Book of the year: middle-American calendrical systems* (Salt Lake City, UT 1988).

24. A preliminary study of the Villa Alta pocket calendars was published by Alcina Franch. The first contemporary translation of one of the Zapotec songs of Villa Alta appeared in Tavárez, 'De cantares zapotecos a "libros del demonio": la extirpación de discursos doctrinales híbridos en Villa Alta', *Acervos: Boletín de los Archivos y Bibliotecas de Oaxaca* 17 (2000), p.19-27.

measures, whose newly expanded range had been richly illustrated by the spectacle of the decaying body parts of the Cajonos rebels. In 1702, Maldonado himself brought his proclamation to the towns of San Melchor Betaza and Santo Tomás Lachitaa in Villa Alta. Betaza was a relatively large town, with an estimated population of 935 residents in 1703; the neighbouring community of Lachitaa shared numerous political and kinship links with that of Betaza, and had an estimated population of 178 individuals in the same year.²⁵

Although local extirpation campaigns were carried out in Betaza earlier, only scant information about them is extant. It is known that around 1679, an inquiry carried out by a visiting ecclesiastical judge resulted in the punishment of two 'teachers of idolatries' – Mateo Sánchez and Pedro de Vargas – and in the flight of a third specialist, Simón de Santiago the One-Eyed, who would be interrogated again in 1704 (AVA Criminal 117, 24r., 38v.). This campaign was probably linked to the aforementioned investigation of the native priests of Cajonos by Bishop Del Puerto in 1679.²⁶ It was no surprise that 'idolatrous' practices had flourished in Betaza; after all, this was a native community which celebrated only seven Christian holidays per year under the supervision of a visiting priest. Furthermore, it seems that, before 1704, visiting priests did not perform such celebrations in Betaza itself, but in a site located between the towns of Betaza and Lachitaa (AVA Criminal 117, 28v., 27v.).²⁷

In spite of Maldonado's visit, the townspeople of Betaza and Lachitaa were not ready to renounce their communal ritual practices. According to Agustín Gonzalo Zárate, a former *regidor* of Betaza in 1702 – and the ritual 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 certainly exceeded

25. These are the estimates given by Chance. First, he calculated an average for the figures of married household heads listed in AGI Mexico 881 for 1701-1704; then, he multiplied this number by a factor of 4.6 – which was used by Cook and Borah in their landmark demographic survey of the Mixteca Alta.

26. This inquest was led by Friar Bartolomé de Alcántara, an ecclesiastical judge who specialised in idolatry trials, and a renowned preacher in the Valley and Sierra Zapotec variants. In a June 1683 petition for the title of *magister in titulo predicationis* to the Dominican headquarters in Rome, Alcántara boasted about his punishment of some 'idolaters and sorcerers whom I dragged out of the most rugged mountains of the sierra and frightful gullies, with great risk to life and limb'. In an August 1683 letter of support, Friar Joseph López, *Provincial* of the Dominicans in Oaxaca, stated that Alcántara deserved this promotion due to the campaigns he led during López's four-year tenure, which had resulted in the capture of more than fifty idolaters (AGOP XIII 012760).

27. Betaza and Lachitaa's abridged liturgical year featured the observance of Epiphany (which also celebrated Saint Melchor, Betaza's patron saint), Christ's purification at the temple, Easter, the feast of the Holy Spirit, Corpus Christi, Our Lady of the Rosary, All Saints, and Christmas.

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 the *cuana betao* plant,²⁸ the town of Betaza would ask its own tutelary deities what would befall them. Two ritual specialists – Simón de Santiago and Nicolás de Espina Aracena – ingested *cuana betao* before the entire town, which gathered in a public space for the occasion. Santiago, the eldest of the two, would later declare in Villa Alta that the deities of Betaza had revealed: 'that they had fallen into the hands of God the Father, 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 *Goque Yagchila*, and in fact, he was brought out and burned in the town square of [Villa Alta] later.'²⁹ 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'.³⁰

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.³¹ 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 feasts 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 wellbeing for the community. Later in the year, Friar Francisco de Orozco, their visiting priest, came to ask the people of Betaza to surrender their ritual implements and texts; however, the townspeople denied having any.³² After this visit, Betaza's officials called a communal meeting, and discussed whether they would surrender their ritual implements, specialists, and calendrical texts. According to Agustín Gonzalo Zárate, a consensus emerged: 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'.³³

28. According to multiple testimonies, certain Zapotec ritual specialists took the seeds of a plant called *cuana betao* in Sierra Zapotec, ground them, and drank them with water. This plant is probably *Rivea corymbosa*, a vine of the morning glory family with hallucinogenic properties, which was known as *ololiuhqui* in Nahuatl communities.

29. AVA Criminal 117, 39v-40r. In fact, several of the Zapotec-language ritual songs seized during Maldonado's campaign celebrated *Coque Yagchila* and other deities. These songs were originally owned by the Betaza specialist Pedro de Vargas.

30. AVA Criminal 117, 37v.

31. Agustín Gonzalo Zárate claimed that there were eight communal ritual celebrations in 1702, while Simón de Santiago claimed there were ten celebrations in that year.

32. AVA Criminal 117, 60r.

33. AVA Criminal 117, 24r-v.

Following a pattern of inter-community communication, a local diplomacy of sorts that was also pursued by rebel communities during the Tehuantepec (1660) and Cancuc (1712) rebellions, Betaza's town council sent letters to neighbouring towns informing them of their decision to resist Maldonado's proclamation, and asking them for support. According to Juan Martín de Cabueñas, Betaza's *gobernador*, the council sent a letter asking the neighbouring communities of Yaa, Yatee, and Lachirioag not to break ranks with Betaza, and not to turn in their idols or fruit stocks,³⁴ even if events led to a major legal proceeding. According to Joseph de Celis, a former *fiscal*, *maestro de doctrina*, and *maestro de capilla*, in Lachitaa, the people of his town, who were 'almost one and the same' with those of Betaza, supported Betaza's decision:

in December of the previous year [1703], [...] Joseph Martín, *alguacil mayor*, the *alcalde* Pedro Martín, the *regidor* Felipe de Santiago, and the *escribano* Nicolás de Celis sent a paper with said *alguacil mayor* to the towns of Yaa, Yatee, Lachirioag, in which these towns were admonished to stand together with the people of Lachitaa and Betaza in any business or disturbance that might occur, for these two towns would not surrender their idols, and the other towns should not surrender them either. The other towns responded that they would not turn them in.³⁵

*c. 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 17 December 1703 during a local fair that took place in Yalálag, a town located a few kilometres 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 Yalálag's fair. Among the crowds of outsiders who thronged in the town square, Bernardo García, a Spaniard from Villa Alta, recognised Agustín Gonzalo 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 decisions that he approached one of the *regidores* of Yalálag and scolded him by saying:

34. The *alcaldes mayores* of Villa Alta often attempted to enforce royal decrees against the clandestine production and consumption of alcoholic beverages by seizing and destroying stocks of fruits, sugar cane, and rudimentary milling equipment used to make a beverage called *tepache* or *aguardiente*. See AVA Criminal 179.

35. AVA Criminal 117, 50r.

36. Yalálag 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 road between Oaxaca and the cabecera of Villa Alta, and its position as the largest town in southern Villa Alta, with an estimated population of 1577 residents in 1703 (see Chance, *Conquest*).

'perhaps the people of Yalálag are women, for they do 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.'³⁷ After this exchange, Don Juan de la Cruz, governor of Yalálag, conferred with García, and decided to arrest Zárate, Paz, and four other former Betaza and Lachitaa officials who were at the fair. Since the road from Yalálag to the *cabecera* of Villa Alta went through Betaza and Lachitaa, de la Cruz decided to take some measures to thwart any communal attempts to free his prisoners. First, he sent one or two couriers bearing a notification about the arrests to the *alcalde mayor* of Villa Alta through the main road; then he and other officials took Zárate on a circuitous route to Villa Alta that passed through Mixe communities located east of the main road, knowing that this would keep them out of reach of Betaza's residents.

Initially the people of Betaza seem to have interpreted these arrests as a direct attack on them from the community of Yalálag.³⁸ Shortly after his detention, Zárate was able to send a nephew back to Betaza with news about the arrests and one of Yalálag's couriers was detained in Betaza by an angry crowd, who placed him under detention. But 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 Betaza 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 *alguacil 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 Yalálag 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 nipped in the bud Betaza's 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 Yalálag. This order had the effect of discouraging any would-be revolt leaders, since it included all the former elected office

37. AVA Criminal 117, 9r.

38. In fact, upon learning of the detention of their husbands, some of the prisoners' wives left Betaza with one of their *alcaldes* in order complain to the *alcalde mayor* that the officials of Yalálag had seized their husbands without justification. On the other hand, the extant records do not indicate the existence of conflicting claims over neighbouring lands and forests between Yalálag and Betaza during this period. However, Betaza and Lachitaa seem to have had land conflicts with their northern neighbours of San Andrés Yaa (AVA Criminal 207, 1728).

holders in Betaza and Lachitaa who, as ritual specialists, had orchestrated communal ritual practices in both towns during the previous decade. For Betaza, the arrested leaders included Fabián de Vargas (a *fiscal* in 1703), Don Pedro de Paz (former *regidor*, *alcalde*, and *gobernador*), Simón de Santiago the One-Eyed (Betaza's eldest specialist), Agustín Gonzalo Zárate (a *regidor* in 1702), Joseph Bolaños (a former *alcalde*), Agustín Gutiérrez de Benito (the town's *escribano* since c.1686), Agustín Gonzalo (an *alcalde* in 1693), Nicolás Martín (an *alcalde* in 1703), and Nicolas de Espina Aracena and Simón de Santiago (Betaza's foremost *cuana betao* drinkers). For Lachitaa, this list included Pedro Cano (a *cuana betao* drinker), Nicolás de Celis (a renowned specialist and a former *fiscal*, *escribano*, and *maestro de doctrina*), and Joseph de Celis (a *belao* specialist³⁹ who had been *fiscal* three times).

On 14 January 1704, after a defender was appointed to represent these defendants, a parade of witnesses began wending its way before Cotes. The defendants provided Cotes with detailed accounts of 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.

d. *The social and financial organisation of communal ritual practices in Betaza*

Independently of their theological status, communal ritual practices in *pueblos de indios* were a collective undertaking financed by individual contributions. 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. According to colonial law, Indians were held responsible for a variety of obligations to the crown and to the local community. A fixed monetary yearly tax was collected from each adult Indian; male Indians contributed a fixed amount of days of free labour per year to various community and crown projects. In Betaza, town officials took collections to satisfy the yearly demand for tribute to the crown. A group of twenty-four *mayordomos*, who were replaced on a rotating basis, raised three pesos each⁴⁰ in order to cover expenditures for the visiting priest and for the seven public Christian holidays that he led yearly. Additional funds for

39. The term *belao* designated a singer and musician who performed ritual Zapotec songs.

40. The most commonly used monetary units in New Spain were the peso and the real. One peso equaled eight reales; one real had several subdivisions (half, quarter, and eighth). The usual daily wages for a non-indentured agricultural labourer ranged between two and three reales.

Christian celebrations were raised by the only religious confraternity in town, the Cofradía del Rosario.⁴¹ 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 between twenty-three to twenty-seven pesos that remained from the collections taken to fund the visits of their priest.⁴² At least once, twenty-five 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, Lachitaa's foremost specialist, so that he would impart his knowledge of ritual practices to two Betaza men: Nicolás Martín and Nicolás de Espina Aracena.⁴³

Gutiérrez, Vargas, who was a *fiscal* in 1703, and former *alcalde* Bolaños indicated two other methods for raising funds for communal ritual practices. The first was an outright collection of between one and one-and-a-half reales per household head, which was used to fund immediate expenditures. The second involved a set of communal obligations and money lending practices that mirrored the financial practices of indigenous sodalities in other *pueblos de indios*.⁴⁴ Three *mayordomos* – Juan de Paz, Juan de Celis, and Agustín García – supervised the ploughing of three plots of land corresponding to the three barrios of Betaza, and kept three dwellings in which celebrants ate and drank after the communal celebrations. After the maize obtained from these plots had been sold, the amount that was raised was lent to people in the community at a high interest rate of 37.5 per cent, or three reales for each peso that was borrowed.⁴⁵ 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. In order to raise additional funds, these teams of oxen were also rented out for a daily rate of three reales.⁴⁶

The following deposition by Fabián de Vargas, son of a famous 'teacher of idolatry', captures both the range of activities of which communal

41. AVA Criminal 117, 17v.

42. AVA Criminal 117, 28r.

43. Joseph de Celis, Nicolás' brother, was a *belao* performer, and he taught his ritual specialisation to four Betaza residents: Gaspar Bautista, Fabian Luis, Joseph Luis, and Juan Gerónimo.

44. Central Mexican indigenous sodalities routinely constituted themselves as money-lending enterprises. Dehouve describes a well-documented operation during the 1760s at the Nahua community of Tlapa, where the 'money of the saint' – a collective fund raised by pooling monetary contributions from *cofradía* members – was used as a source of revenue for local worship. Both *cofradía* members and non-members borrowed amounts from this fund at usurious rates of interest – which ranged between 25, 50, and even 100 per cent; the income was used to finance public festivities and *cofradía* expenses.

45. AVA Criminal 117, 17r-v.

46. AVA Criminal 117, 28v.

ritual practices consisted, and the various expenditures which 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 *cabildo*, 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 *pisiete*, which each Indian carries in a little gourd. [...] After making those sacrifices, the *alcaldes* purchase 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 *teponaztli* drum 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. After the sacrifice, the town officials are given small *tortillas* made of uncooked maize that have been blessed by the priests; beforehand, [the priests] break off a little piece and offer it along with the paper and the blood. [...] At harvest time, they also gather many tender ears of maize for the sacrifices; each person brings in five ears, which are blessed along with the *tortillas*. [...] For the blessing, they say, 'You lord, you are Our God, and we offer these ears of maize to you so that we, your sons, may eat them.'⁴⁷

Although the vocabulary of the court interpreter has reduced the original Zapotec terms into routine Christian designations – such as 'priests', 'confession', 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 outside observer 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 ritual practices that were essential to the communal identity and well-being of Betaza; therefore, they were practised clandestinely, and under the potential risk of discovery by outsiders. From a local perspective, it is likely that these practices did not seem any more mixed or syncretic than the Christian celebrations that were performed under the vigilance of a priest; they simply belonged in a communal realm that was kept relatively separate in spatial, budgetary, and social terms from the public Christian practices that the town was expected to practise.

47. AVA Criminal 117, 16r-18r.

e. *Cui bono?* Political and financial stakes in Betaza's extirpation campaign

On 4 February 1704, a few weeks after the interrogation of the arrested specialists began in Villa Alta, the vicar of Betaza, Friar Joseph Cardona, celebrated mass in Betaza and pronounced a communal absolution from idolatry over the entire town. But the town authorities were not ready for such closure, and struck back at the people whom they regarded as traitors the day after Cardona's absolution. According to Betaza resident Juan Mateo, he was intercepted as he walked down the street by a certain Juan Luis, who started beating him, and accused him of betraying the people of Betaza:

and then, the *alguacil mayor* arrived and put him in jail. The morning after, the *alcalde* Juan Martin Cabueñas came in, and told him: 'Now you will see, you who betrayed the *pueblo*'; [Juan Mateo] asked him to present witnesses of his betrayals, and the *alcalde* answered that he would see them after his pants came off. Then, [Cabueñas] had him tied to the pillory; as he whipped him, he asked how many of his associates had gone to Villa Alta to give accounts about their customs. Fabián Gonzalo and Francisco Suárez were saying that it would be best to kill him, just like the people of San Francisco Cajonos had done before [with traitors], since he was a betrayer of *pueblos*. Cabueñas said he would have him tied to a mule's tail, and taken to a place where he would be lost once and for all. [...] He was then given a five peso fine, and released.⁴⁸

Apparently neither Juan Luis nor Cabueñas were driven merely by personal opposition or allegiance to Christian teachings. When Cabueñas was called in to declare he accepted having punished Juan Luis, but claimed that Juan Luis was scheming to drive the current elected town officials out of office in order to assume an elective post – a plausible but undocumented claim.

As the trial proceeded, Cotes became more interested in investigating what the people of Betaza had done with the unclaimed tribute amounts; in fact, his interest in the idolatrous transgressions of Betaza and Lachitaa decreased. This change was motivated by an assessment of the case that was made by the Viceroy in July 1704. In this consultation, the Viceroy resolved that, although the Laws of the Indies granted *alcaldes mayores* the faculty of initiating investigation against idolaters and carrying out punishment after due consultations to the *Audiencia*,⁴⁹ the investigation of idolatry pertained to ecclesiastical judges. While the Viceroy allowed

48. AVA Criminal 117, 51r-v.

49. The viceroy's response points out that, according to Laws 6 and 7 in Book 1, Title 1 of the Laws of the Indies, civil authorities were requested to intervene in the fight to uproot native idolatries, and were asked to issue orders forbidding natives to engage in such practices (AVA Criminal 117, 62v); this seems to be a reference to Laws 10, 11, and 12 of Pinelo's 1635 *Recopilación* (see Sánchez Bella, ed., *Recopilación de las Indias por Antonio de León Pinelo*, Mexico 1992). These directives only required civil authorities to be receptive to ecclesiastical extirpation attempts, and did not outline a specific civil mandate or policy against native idolaters.

the *alcalde mayor* to proceed with these trials, it was suggested that he concentrate on the misappropriation of tributes to the crown, and that he turn in the trial records to the ecclesiastical powers upon their request. Therefore Cotes decided to make a distinction between the natives who were mere participants in acts regarded as idolatrous, and the officials who had misappropriated tributes in order to finance communal ritual practices. At least six of the ritual specialists who did not have a direct role in the social and financial organisation of communal ritual practices – Fabián de Vargas, Nicolás de Espina Aracena, Simón de Santiago, Pedro Cano, Nicolás de Celis, and Joseph de Celis – were released from jail, although their property was seized in order to cover fines and trial costs. The other defendants also had their property seized, and remained in jail at least until March 1705. Unfortunately, the records of this trial are incomplete, and one can only speculate about the final penalties that Cotes imposed on the fourteen remaining defendants.⁵⁰

It should be noted that Cotes' interest in the extirpation of idolatry in Betaza was not merely theological; in fact, it involved various political and financial stakes. Toward the end of the Betaza trial, Cotes received a letter in Zapotec from the 1705 *cabildo* of Betaza in which these officials promised to turn in a portion of the royal tribute that would have been used to fund communal ritual practices; the total was 168 pesos, or six reales per each married man.⁵¹ Lists were promptly drawn to ensure that each tribute payer in Betaza turned in these amounts to the *alcalde mayor*. Other documentation suggests that Cotes sought to extract personal gain from alleged idolaters. A dispute between Cotes and Friar Gaspar de los Reyes, the Dominican who confronted the rebels of Cajonos in 1700, illustrates this point. In October 1705, Reyes learned that three residents of Betaza, which included one of the 1705 *alcaldes*, had been found to have kept ritual implements in their homes, in spite of the ongoing idolatry investigations. To his indignation, Reyes discovered that, after holding these three defendants in jail for a few days Cotes had released them after receiving a total payment of 122 pesos, a rather handsome sum. As Holy Office commissioner for the town of Xuquila, Reyes attempted to bring this irregularity to the attention of the Inquisition, and made a trip to Mexico City to plead his case. But Bishop Maldonado – who, according to Reyes' plausible argument, had formed an alliance with Cotes to counter Dominican influence in Oaxaca – accused Reyes of insubordination for

50. If Cotes followed the punitive policies exercised by previous *alcaldes mayores* of Villa Alta, they included a public *auto da fé*, corporal punishment of at least one hundred lashes, forced exile from Betaza or Lachitaa, and either forced labour in the *obrajes* (manufacturing workshops), or imprisonment in Maldonado's brand new prison of idolaters in Oaxaca City for an unspecified period of time.

51. This figure yields a 1705 estimate of 224 families in Betaza, which is only slightly higher than the figure of 203 families in 1703 in AGI Mexico 881, no. 12, which Chance used to yield an estimate of 935 inhabitants, using Cook and Borah's Mixteca Alta ratio of 4.6 family members per household. See John K. Chance, *The Conquest of the Sierra*, p.48, 64.

leaving the province without his permission, and Cotes simply argued that Reyes was mentally unstable. The powerful Cotes had the last word; due to the resulting scandal, Reyes lost his post as commissioner.⁵²

f. Beyond Betaza: Yalálag's attempts to assert local native autonomy

Betaza's town council's attempts to retain a locally defined notion of autonomy contradicted colonial policies that sought to punish the involvement of native officials in ritual practices regarded as idolatrous. Ever since Bishop Zumárraga removed from office a native judge from Tlatelolco who was accused of being an idolater in May 1539,⁵³ ecclesiastical and civil authorities had followed a simple policy: any native official convicted of engaging in idolatry or superstition was removed from his post, and forbidden from ever again assuming elective office. In fact, idolatry convictions were sometimes used by political factions in some *pueblos de indios* in order to disqualify their opponents and remove them from office.⁵⁴

The failure of Betaza's town council to reproduce its vision of local autonomy did not discourage other Villa Alta communities, which continued their attempts to define local autonomy throughout the first third of the eighteenth century. Some native officials sought gaps in the colonial legal system in order to fight removal from office as a consequence of idolatry accusations. In July 1735, as a result of an indictment of many of the residents of Yalálag for alleged cannibalism and child sacrifice, the entire town *cabildo* – Francisco Hernández (*gobernador*), Pedro de Aguilar and Fernando Martín (*alcaldes*), and Francisco de la Cruz, Gerónimo de Espina, Diego Hernández, and Juan Mateo (*regidores*) – was removed from office by the *alcalde mayor* of Villa Alta.⁵⁵ But the demoted *cabildo* concocted a clever strategy to regain their posts. Since the Laws of Indies forbade any intervention by civil or ecclesiastical authorities in the local elections of *pueblos de indios*, they sent a complaint to the *Audiencia* of Mexico stating that their *alcalde mayor* had stripped them of their offices

52. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico (henceforward AGN) Inquisición 734; AGN, Reales Cédulas duplicadas, vol.42, exp. 352

53. This judge was Marcos Hernández Atlabatl. AGN Inquisición 42, exp. 17.

54. An illustrative Villa Alta example is the proceeding initiated by Sebastián de Santiago y Nicolás Gomez from Lalopa in 1714, who complained to an ecclesiastical official that Francisco de la Cruz – a ritual specialist who had been denounced during Maldonado's 1704 campaign – had been elected governor in their town, in spite of having been forbidden from assuming elective posts ever again. Although this proceeding is now incomplete, it is likely that Cruz would have been removed from office because of the inquest (AVA Civil 61).

55. AVA Criminal 225. The accusations of collective child sacrifice and cannibalism against the people of Yalálag are levelled only once in a June 1735 indictment from Friar Santiago y Calderón, bishop of Oaxaca; no records of this trial are extant. Since the only previous extant accusation of ritual cannibalism against Villa Alta natives was made in 1534 (AGI Justicia 191, exp. 2), it is difficult to assess the extirpators' claims.

without justification. The pending idolatry accusations were not mentioned. As a result, they obtained a royal decree ordering Eusebio Ferrá y Carmona, the *Audiencia's* public prosecutor, to reinstate Hernández, Aguilar and Martín in their posts. Ferrá y Carmona carried out this order before November 1735.

When Juan Vizarrón y Eguiarreta, who occupied the posts of Viceroy and Archbishop of Mexico at the time, learned about these events he immediately annulled the decree obtained by the *cabildo* members of Yalálag, and had them stripped from their offices and arrested for a second time in January 1736. In a subsequent investigation, Ferrá y Carmona was imprisoned and interrogated. But there was a curious development: the original decree sent by the *Audiencia* to reinstate the *cabildo* of Yalálag had disappeared and could not be found at all. The 1735 *cabildo* members of Yalálag, along with twenty-one other defendants, paid a steep price for their attempts to assert a local notion of native autonomy: they were incarcerated in the prison of idolaters in Oaxaca City, probably for the rest of their lives.⁵⁶ It should be stressed, however, that this case is one of the last extant trials that portray a direct confrontation over communal ritual practices between native town councils and colonial authorities in Villa Alta.

Conclusions

How can the fact that native resistance in Betaza did not result in a serious confrontation with colonial authorities, as had occurred in Cajonos three years earlier, be explained? It should be noted that collective engagement in these practices did not involve an explicit project of rebellion against ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Since Betaza's town officials and many of its residents regarded these practices as a propitiatory re-enactment of the ties between them and their collective past, their only apparent political objective was to hide and defend them in the face of novel and more intensive idolatry extirpation campaigns. It could be that the *cabildo* of Betaza misread the arrest of their specialists at the Yalálag fair: based on previous experience, they did not expect a neighbouring native community to take the side of idolatry extirpaters, and they believed that the arrests were a collective act of aggression on the part of Yalálag. When a small army arrived from Villa Alta making inquiries, it was too late to organise armed resistance, and the town officials and leading ritual specialists had little choice but to surrender to the powerful *alguacil mayor* Joseph de la

56. AVA Criminal 227. Unfortunately, the proceedings against the people of Yalálag are incomplete. The fact that the original decree obtained by the Yalálag officials was never found suggests either that these officials destroyed it on purpose, or that its execution was facilitated by bribing Ferrá y Carmona.

Sierra.⁵⁷ At this point, Betaza's fight against extirpation was a losing proposition in both ideological and political terms: Betaza's own tutelary deities had predicted their own demise, and its own neighbours had not pursued the path of resistance that they had vowed to support through their clandestine correspondence. The spirit of Betaza's former elected officials had probably been broken by these developments, and they yielded easily to Cotes' questions about their communal ritual practices, allowing one of the most detailed descriptions of the social organisation of clandestine communal ritual practices in a native community in colonial Mexico to be inscribed in legal records.⁵⁸

The Betaza idolatry trials provide us with an unexpectedly detailed perspective into the local reformulation of a prescriptive political system that was imposed by the colonial regime. Betaza's councilmen refashioned the obligations and faculties of their posts as *alcaldes*, *escribanos*, and *regidores* in order to reproduce a separate spatial, social, and economic realm for collective ritual practices. It would be misleading to label these practices as clandestine; from the perspective of Betaza's residents, they were both public and collective exercises, but they seemed clandestine and illegitimate to the eyes of the extirpaters. Just like some of their contemporaries – the Maya *maestros cantores* in Yucatan⁵⁹ – Betaza's town officials led a dual existence as leading members of the civil and Christian local spheres, and as ritual specialists who participated in collective and private ritual practices. As in Yucatan, this attempt to reproduce a position of authority in both official and local civil and religious spheres was suppressed by civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

In their attempts to refashion local political offices, the people of Betaza, Lachitaa, and Yalálag attempted to profit from a *de jure* separation between indigenous and non-indigenous subjects: as native subjects, they endeavoured to maintain a dual system of public religious practices that would only be viable in a relatively isolated *pueblo de indios*. The social reproduction of a dual system in these communities was facilitated by their geographic isolation, and by the laxity of the evangelisation policies pursued by Dominicans and secular priests in the area during the first half of the seventeenth century. But during the second half of the seventeenth century, two policy changes began to have substantial effects in Villa Alta. On the one hand, ecclesiastical authorities embraced a more severe set of legal measures and punitive efforts against alleged idolaters;

57. De la Sierra was a clever political player; besides being Villa Alta's permanent *alguacil mayor* he ran a lucrative textile trade, and was one of the most influential Spaniards in the region (see Chance, *The Conquest of the Sierra*, p.101).

58. Over one hundred *pueblos de indios* in Villa Alta provided Bishop Maldonado with collective confessions, and many of their specialists were interrogated separately by Cotes in November 1704 (AGI Mexico 882). Compared to the earlier depositions of the Betaza and Lachitaa specialists, these statements were brief and repetitive, and they do not cover as much pragmatic, economic, and social ground.

59. Farriss, *Maya society under colonial rule*, p.341.

on the other, the office of the *alcalde mayor* in Villa Alta expanded its reaches into idolatry extirpation measures, and increased its economic and political impact among natives through a greater control of colonial policies – such as the *repartimiento de efectos* – that appropriated goods and labour obligations in native communities. In the most terrible of ways, local Zapotec deities had the last word. As Betaza's ritual specialists conversed with 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 hegemony projects – had finally arrived in the inhospitable mountain ranges of Villa Alta.

RUTH HILL

Casta as culture and the *sociedad de castas* as literature*

In Magnus Mörner's study of race mixture, he defined eighteenth-century Spanish America as a society of castes (*sociedad de castas*). The title of his study reflected his assumption that the concept of race was fundamental to the ideology of societies of caste, while his conceptualisation of *casta* suggested incorrectly that it was interchangeable with 'mixed-blood'.¹ A Spanish and Portuguese word that meant a stock, kind, breed, religious community or descent group, *casta* was applied to humans as well as pears, trees, dogs, bulls, and so on.² The misunderstanding of *casta* has persisted in the best studies of colonial Spanish America whose authors do not adequately examine the Spanish and Latin terms that were used to designate peoples of mixed ancestry.³ Some Hispanists have approached the terms for people of mixed lineage as products of the colonial

* Research for this essay was supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and The John Carter Brown Library.

1. Magnus Mörner, *Race mixture in the history of Latin America* (Boston, MA 1967). Morner appears to understand that *castas* were descent groups that were either homogeneous (pure) or heterogeneous (impure or mixed). But as he treats the 'learned' taxonomies of *castas* he omits all *castas* that are homogeneous, from which scholars have subsequently and incorrectly inferred that *castas* were by definition groups of people of mixed ancestry. Perhaps the only Latin Americanist who uses *casta* correctly is Aguirre Beltrán (Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La Población negra de México: estudio etnohistórico*, Mexico City 1984).

2. Studies in which *casta* is assumed to be a surrogate for race or mixed-blood include: Stuart B. Schwartz, 'Colonial identities and the "sociedad de castas"', *Colonial Latin American review* 4 (1995), p.185-201; David Cahill, 'Colour by numbers: racial and ethnic categories in the viceroyalty of Peru, 1532-1824', *Journal of Latin American studies* 26 (1994), p.325-46; R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of racial domination: plebeian society in colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Madison, WI 1994); Guiomar Dueñas Vargas, *Los Hijos del pecado: ilegitimidad y vida familiar en la Santafé de Bogotá colonial* (Bogotá 1997); Rodney D. Anderson, 'Race and social stratification: a comparison of working-class Spaniards, Indians and Castas in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1821', *Hispanic American historical review* 68 (1988), p.209-43; and Robert H. Jackson, *Race, caste, and status: Indians in colonial Spanish America* (Albuquerque, NM 1999).

3. Jack Forbes (*Black Africans and Native Americans: color, race and caste in the evolution of red-black peoples*, Oxford 1988) often employs 'race' and 'racial', and he claims that charts and paintings of castes (*cuadros de castas*) 'developed in the Spanish Empire [...] derived, no doubt, from a desire to clarify the racial caste systems which had evolved in the colonies, but the influence of Linnæan rationalism must also have been a factor' (Forbes, *Black Africans and Native Americans*, p.104). Forbes offers no evidence for 'Linnæan rationalism', which flies in the face of every account of science in colonial Spanish America.