

Negotiated Christianity

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, Jesuit missions in the Spanish Amazon had to deal with indigenous versions of Catholicism

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Evangelization of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon by Europeans involved more than a passive absorption of western thought. Christian ideas had to be translated into Amerindian languages and, thus, acquired meanings that the missionaries were unable to control, especially because many of the religious duties were actually performed by the natives themselves, given the scarcity of priests. Conversion was not in fact a unilateral imposition, but rather an “intercultural dialog” through which indigenous peoples adapted Christianity to their own belief systems. The breadth of this intellectual exchange has been the subject of study since 2013 by historian Francismar Alex Lopes de Carvalho in a postdoctoral fellowship at the USP School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences (FFLCH-USP). His study encompasses the Maynas and Mojos Missions, established by Jesuits in the service of Spain in what is now known as Ecuador and Bolivia. The material analyzed by the researcher, to a large extent unpublished, was found in archives and libraries in Spain, Italy, Portugal and the United States.

The first stage of Carvalho’s work has been completed and, in 2015, resulted in an article in the journal *Varia Historia*, published by the Federal University of Minas Gerais. A second article has been accepted by the School of Hispano-American Studies of Seville (Spain) for publication in the journal *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*. Carvalho says that the Mojos Missions were established in 1682 and prospered as a result of the production of cocoa, tallow, wax, sugar and textiles. Together, these missions baptized 24,914 indigenous people by 1713. The Maynas Missions, established in 1638, did not fare as well. Devastated by successive epidemics, they were unable to survive without financial support from the colonial administration. They produced grains, cocoa and sarsaparilla but always in small quantities. By 1719, only 7,966 inhabitants remained.

Carvalho became interested in the intercultural dialog between Europeans and indigenous peoples when preparing his dissertation entitled *Lealdades negociadas: povos indígenas e a expansão dos impérios ibéricos nas regiões centrais da América do Sul (segunda*

metade do século XVIII) (Negotiated loyalties: indigenous peoples and the expansion of the Iberian empires in the central regions of South America (second half of the 18th century), defended in 2012 at the Department of History of FFLCH and published as a book by Alameda Press in 2014. In this study, he notes that the Portuguese and Spanish conquest of the Amazon was based on a policy of co-optation of tribal leaders through which the caciques bargained for material advantages in exchange for their support of the colonizers.

Once Carvalho’s dissertation was completed, he began to study how the indigenous peoples of the region appropriated Catholicism, finding that the negotiations between Europeans and natives also extended into the ideological realm. The natives adopted Christian concepts, but they endowed them with meanings that were foreign to the original interpretations, leading to the emergence of a hybrid Christianity.

This “spiritual bargaining” began with the “arrival of missionaries”, a practice that probably dates back to Father Manoel da Nóbrega in 16th century São Pau-



A 16th century European print representing the devil enslaving indigenous people of the New World: echoes of the strategy of catechization adopted by the Jesuits

lo: surrounded by soldiers, the Jesuits would “invite” the Indians to migrate to their settlements; if they chose not to go, “they would be subject to a ‘just war’ promoted by the troops,” Carvalho explains. The goal of these arrivals was to force the natives to accept “faith through fear,” as political scientist José Eisenberg writes in his book *As missões jesuíticas e o pensamento político moderno* (The Jesuit missions and modern political thought) (UFMG, 2000).

The same methods were used in the Amazon region, but because the borders there were still fluid, the Portuguese and Spanish needed to compete for the loyalty of the natives. Convincing them, however, meant going beyond mere violence. Pedro Puntoni, a professor at the FFLCH-USP and dissertation adviser to Carvalho, noted that “the context of the border is critical” in explaining negotiations with tribal leaders, and it resulted in the concession of economic benefits and in a certain degree of administrative autonomy to the local ethnic groups.

Since there were so few of them, the missionaries assigned various tasks to the Indians, such as those of the cate-

chist, sacristan, musician and overseer of doctrine. Delegation of these tasks, nearly all spiritual in nature, seriously limited the Jesuits’ power to impose their ideas. “In the Maynas Missions,” explains Carvalho, “the missionaries had to deal with alternative interpretations of Christian doctrine as conceived by the Indians, a fact the priests could not entirely avoid because they depended on the concepts available in the local languages and on help from natives to carry out the conversions.”

To the missionaries, this resistance by the natives to European thought manifested as the work of the devil. Thus the profusion of its figure in reports by the Jesuits. However, as the author writes in his article published in *Varia Historia*, such mentions did not constitute a rejection of the indigenous beliefs but rather “an attempt to establish analogous points through which intercultural dialogue and negotiation of the sacred universe could flow.”

Why did the figure of the devil become the focus of the intercultural dialog? According to Carvalho, it all began because a number of the priests shared the conviction that, following the Christianization of Europe, “the devil and its infernal

horde had moved on to the Americas.” The New World was under the “tyranny of Satan”, thus the obsession in identifying traces of the demon in exotic beliefs.

“It is in this scenario of ‘demonization’ of indigenous deities that the priests accomplished a metamorphosis of the spiritual entities that were damaging the Christian figure of the devil,” Carvalho says. The Christian concept experienced important changes during this metamorphosis, however. The Indians either incorporated the Christian demon as just one more god in their pantheon or simply began to refer to certain known evil spirits as “the devil”.

The Jesuits could not always avoid changes in the meaning of the term “devil” because of the linguistic strategy they had adopted. To extol the Christian ideals, says Carvalho, “the Jesuits preferred to keep the Spanish words for positive fundamental terms for the church, such as God, the sacraments, etc., while allowing native words to describe negative things.” Such subtlety entailed unexpected consequences because the missionaries were unable to control the meanings attributed to the former indigenous entities, neither could they prevent the natives from using these negative terms to denote the Spanish people themselves.

Translation of the European concepts into tribal thought also faced other limitations. While the natives were happy to accept the idea of the devil, the same cannot be said regarding the notion of hell. “The concept seemed absurd to the indigenous people,” the researcher explains. “How could they believe in the existence of hell, a place where their ancestors, who had not known Christianity, would suffer eternally together with the most prestigious warriors and shamans?”

The Jesuits’ troubles did not stop there: attempts to eliminate the role of the shamans as intermediaries to the spiritual world also failed. “The missionaries were unable to completely destroy the common belief in the power of the shamans because they themselves were accepted in the communities as shamans who were more powerful, generous and effective,” Carvalho notes. “The missionary was seen as someone who possessed the unusual ability to manipulate spiritual forces. Therefore, he was a provider of blessings as well as plagues and curses.”

Arte de Lengua. de
Las Misiones, del Rio
Napo de La Nacion
de los infieles. Quen
que hogos. y dioma

General de los de mas de ese Rio
Payo huales: Senze huales: An co
teses: en Ca ve lla dos.

Junta Inerte tiene la doctrina
christiana. en dicha Lengua. y
en la del ynga: Al Ve mate:

377
en total 76. 04



Cover page of a glossary of the Tucanoan Indian language written by a Jesuit and an 18th century view of a town in the Maynas Mission

In other words: the indigenous peoples respected priests, partly because priests had assumed duties, such as the distribution of goods, and served as intermediaries with the supernatural world, which fell into the realm of the shamans. According to Carvalho, the Jesuits were unable, however, to weigh in against some native patterns of thought that were ensuring their acceptance. Thus, they attempted to ostracize indigenous sorcerers except in those cases where, because they did not object to gospel teachings, they could be embraced as helpers.

However, the missionaries were not always successful at negotiating their insertion into the communities, and it was not rare to see cases of uprisings and martyrdom of priests. In the thesis entitled *A expressão da vontade: relações interétnicas e rebelião indígena nas missões de Maynas (1685-1698)* (The expression of will: inter-eth-

nic relationships and indigenous rebellion in the Maynas Missions (1685-1698), defended at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) in 2009, doctoral candidate Roberta Fernandes dos Santos demonstrated the difficulties encountered by Father Enrique Richter in establishing a mission along the banks of the Ucayali River. “It appears,” suggests Carvalho with regard to this incident, “that the priest had violated the terms of the initial negotiations that had granted him acceptance by the Indians, because he failed to supply the items he had promised, would be absent for extended periods and imposed a discipline that was not tolerated.” The rebellion culminated in the 1695 murder of the Jesuit.

It is precisely in these situations of conflict, however, that the “demonization” of indigenous belief showed its positive side. In the article *Contato, guerra e negociação: redução e cristianização de Maynas e Jeberos pelos jesuítas na Amazônia no século XVII* (Contact, war and negotiation: reduction and Christianization of Mayas and Jeberos by the Jesuits in 17th century Amazon), published in the *Revista de História Unisinos* in 2007, Fernando Torres-Londoño, a professor in the Department of History at PUC-SP, notes that the presence of the

devil ended up absolving the indigenous people of any “responsibility when conflicts arose.”

According to the Jesuit perspective, explains Carvalho, a channel of reconciliation would be opened with the rebels because the rebellions could be blamed on Satan. “Strictly speaking,” the researcher concludes, “attributing responsibility for martyrdom and the destruction of the missions to the devil made the Indians as human as the Europeans.” ■

Project

Indigenous rule: Iberian municipal institutions and indigenous identities in Maynas and Mojos missions (second half of the 18th century) (2012/06580-6); **Grant Mechanism:** Fellowships in Brazil – Post-doctorate; **Principal Investigator:** Pedro Luís Puntoni (FFLCH-USP); **Grant Recipient:** Francismar Alex Lopes de Carvalho (FFLCH-USP); **Investment:** R\$160,172.31.

Scientific articles

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Book

CARVALHO, F. A. L. DE. *Lealdades negociadas: povos indígenas e a expansão dos impérios ibéricos nas regiões centrais da América do Sul (segunda metade do século XVIII)*. SÃO PAULO: ALAMEDA, 2014. 596 P.