

Research on Confraternities in the Colonial Americas

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Research on the nature, development, and roles of confraternities in the colonial Americas is still in its initial stages. Few coordinated programs of investigation have been undertaken and the studies cited in this survey represent, for the most part, the results of scholars working independently. Yet the study of confraternities in the Americas offers rich and virtually inexhaustible research opportunities. The following remarks and bibliography are intended to form a preliminary, but by no means exhaustive, guide to areas for research in this field.

The “spiritual conquest” of the Americas was undertaken in the sixteenth century almost exclusively by the mendicant orders. They arrived in New Spain (Mexico) shortly after the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521—the Franciscans in 1523, the Dominicans in 1526, and the Augustinians in 1533. Officially invested with all the powers of the secular clergy (for instance, they could administer the sacraments, consecrate their own churches and altars, etc.), the friars were inspired by the challenge and the prospect of preaching to, and converting the Indians, so much so that they may have suffered delusions of spiritual grandeur. They developed an euphoric, millenarian attitude in which all of New Spain was a splendid monastery.¹ In the indigenous peoples, the friars saw souls as yet untouched by corruption, worldliness, or sophistication; in the friars’ view, these people had pure hearts and a childlike naiveté, which meant that they could be molded into “ideal” Christians by the employment of a monastic model.

The three orders soon staked out regions in central and southern Mexico, siting their monasteries in populous areas. In their evangelical efforts, the friars employed a variety of strategies to organize the indigenous people and to teach them Christian beliefs and practices. Foremost among these strategies was the establishment of confraternities.

The mendicants had long been instrumental in founding and fostering confraternities in Spain, and many of the same confraternities were established in New Spain among the Indian, *mestizo*, Hispanic, and black populations. One of the most important and widespread penitential confraternities in Spain, the Vera Cruz (True Cross), was established under the tutelage of the Franciscans in Mexico City as early as 1527.² By the 1540s there were two highly active

1 See John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

2 See William Wroth, *Images of Penance, Images of Mercy: Southwestern ‘Santos’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 21. Another of the earliest confraternities was that of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, which founded the Hospital of Jesús Nazareno in Mexico City. Hernán Cortés

confraternities of the Vera Cruz in Mexico City, one for Indians and one for Spaniards.³ The Dominicans and Augustinians likewise founded confraternities. By the end of the century, penitential brotherhoods of the Holy Burial and the Virgin of Solitude, and devotional confraternities of the Rosary, among others, were found in virtually all Dominican monasteries.⁴ The Augustinians fostered groups dedicated to the Name of Jesus, and virtually all of the orders established sacramental confraternities and devotional brotherhoods dedicated to one or more of the saints.⁵

The foundation of confraternities followed a similar trajectory in the other regions of the Americas. In Guatemala, the earliest confraternity established was that of the Vera Cruz, fostered by the Franciscans in 1533.⁶ In the Kingdom of Peru, the first brotherhoods in Lima were founded shortly after the establishment of the city in 1535. By 1541, four confraternities were located in the Dominican monastery in Lima, including that of the Rosary.⁷ Certainly one fruitful area of research would be to examine and compare the effects or impact of the ideologies of the different mendicant orders on the nature and development of the confraternities that they fostered in the New World.

Confraternities were one of the most significant forces in the transformation of indigenous societies. They were successful throughout the Americas, in rural and urban areas alike, among people of all social classes, race, gender, and ethnicity. In New Spain, as elsewhere, their numbers increased dramatically in the last quarter of the sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century.⁸ By all

wrote of the existence of this confraternity in 1529. See Adolfo Lamas, *Seguridad Social en la Nueva España* (México: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1964), 140-141. According to Alicia Bazarte Martínez, the earliest documented confraternity is that of Los Caballeros de la Cruz, founded by Hernán Cortés in 1526. See *Las cofradías de españoles en la Ciudad de México, 1526-1860* (México: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1989), 34-35.

3 Fr. Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (México: Porrúa, 1941), 94-95.

4 Wroth, 21.

5 Wroth, 21; Fr. Juan de Grijalva, *Crónica de la orden de N.P.S. Agustín en la provincias de la Nueva España* (1624; rpt. México: Porrúa, 1985), 161-162.

6 Francisco de Fuentes y Guzman, *Historia de Guatemala* (Madrid, 1882) 1:237-238.

7 Albert Meyers, "Religious Brotherhoods in Latin America: A Sketch of Two Peruvian Case Studies" in *Manipulating the Saints: Religious Brotherhoods and Social Integration in Postconquest Latin America*, ed. Albert Meyers and Diane Elizabeth Hopkins (Hamburg: Wayasbah, 1988), 9. For confraternities in Peru, see especially Olinda Celestino and Albert Meyers, *Las cofradías en el Perú: region central* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 1981). For Dominican confraternities in Quito, Ecuador, see Rosemarie Terán Najas, *Arte, espacio y religiosidad en el Convento de Santo Domingo* (Quito: Proyecto Ecuador-Bélgica, 1994), 46-53.

8 Although not all scholars believe that confraternities were established during the early phases of missionary activity, most agree that they began to proliferate in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For example, see Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 127-33; James Lockhart, *The*

accounts, confraternities were especially appealing to the indigenous population, and in some towns virtually all the Indians belonged to one. By 1585 there were said to be over 300 Indian confraternities active in Mexico City alone.⁹ The Kingdom of Peru experienced a similar increase; by 1619, there were more than 60 officially recognized confraternities in Lima, and numerous other unofficial brotherhoods.¹⁰

In fact, the success of the confraternities turned out to be far greater than the religious authorities had anticipated. By the end of the sixteenth century, ecclesiastic and civil authorities throughout the viceregal kingdoms had issued decrees calling for a reduction in the number of confraternities, and attempted to control them by requiring that they present statutes, obtain official approval from the bishop, be inspected, have their expenditure books reviewed, etc.¹¹ Such actions were consistent with reforms enacted in Spain under the edicts of the Council of Trent, indicating that the colonies were viewed as more than mere possessions.

A variety of circumstances contributed to the widespread success and popularity of confraternities among the indigenous people. Perhaps foremost was that the structure and function of confraternities in many cases closely paralleled pre-Hispanic forms of social organization. Among the Mexica (Aztecs), for example, the pre-Hispanic *calpul*, or extended kin group, was a closed social unit that, among other things, held land in common and performed communal rituals focused on local deities.¹² Similar base units of social organization existed among the highland Maya (the *chinamit*) and the Pokom (the *molab*). Among the highland Maya of Guatemala, the confraternity system became the cornerstone of indigenous social organization, supplanting the civil and religious functions, and the religious symbolism, even, of the Mayan *chinamit*.¹³

Nahuas After the Conquest (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 218-219, 538 n. 63; John K. Chance and William B. Taylor, "Cofradías y cargos: una perspectiva histórica de la jerarquía cívico-religiosa mesoamericana," *Antropología* 14 (1987), 7; Ernesto de la Torre Villar, "Algunos aspectos acerca de las cofradías y la propiedad territorial en Michoacán," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 4 (1967), 418-419; Murdo J. MacLeod, "Papel social y económico de las cofradías indígenas de la colonia en Chiapas," *Mesoamerica* 4 (1983), 67-68; Serge Gruzinski, "Indian Confraternities, Brotherhoods and *Mayordomías* in Central New Spain," in *The Indian Community of Colonial Mexico*, ed. Arij Ouweneel and Simon Miller (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1990), 206-207; Bazarte Martínez, 45-46.

9 Gruzinski, 207.

10 Meyers, 9.

11 See Meyers, 10-11; Gruzinski, 206-208.

12 See Lockhart, chaps. 2, 5, 6; MacLeod, 70-72.

13 See especially Robert Carlsen, "Social Organization and Disorganization in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala," *Ethnology* 35 (1996), 141-160; Robert Carmack, "La perpetuación del clan patrilineal en Totonicapán," *Antropología e Historia de Guatemala* 18 (1966), 43-60; Robert M. Hill II and John Monaghan, *Continuities in Highland Maya Social Organization* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), chap. 2.

The protean nature of the confraternity itself, its remarkable ability to adapt and transform in response to the environment around it, was also responsible for much of its success. Spanish confraternities were institutionally fluid; the characteristics of their types, structures, activities, and memberships varied widely, even from neighborhood to neighborhood. Furthermore, their ambiguous jurisdictional status, by which their activities were not wholly (in some cases, not at all) in the purview of either church or state, played a large part in creating the adaptable and relatively independent character of these groups.¹⁴

The extraordinary degree to which confraternities could be shaped to reflect the desires, needs, and goals of their membership undoubtedly was a major factor in their popularity among the indigenous peoples of the New World, and is an area of study that looms invitingly large in future research on such groups in the Americas. The sheer diversity of indigenous cultural traditions and social structures that existed throughout the Americas before the conquest presupposes an equal diversity of subsequent confraternal forms, adaptations, and evolution. Thus, there exists a rich potential for studies of the adaptation and transformation of the Spanish and even the European confraternity model throughout the Americas. From this panorama of possibilities, the following issues appear to offer particularly rich potential for further research.

I. Comparative investigations into the nature of rural versus urban confraternities (i.e., studies of the periphery versus the center) may offer useful insight into the process and effects of evangelization. The mendicant orders focused on organizing confraternities in both rural and urban areas, but from very early on the Spanish colonists also established brotherhoods, primarily in urban centers. Membership in the latter was initially limited to *peninsulares* (those born in Spain), but later often included creoles, and such groups appear to have adhered quite closely to Spanish models. Research on urban colonial brotherhoods has increased considerably in recent years. However, studies of rural groups still predominate in the literature and are too numerous to mention here.¹⁵ Broader comparative studies of urban versus rural confraternities would also be a useful area of research, for many of the differences between the two in the New World appear to be inventive departures from the traditional European models.¹⁶

II. Echoing European precedent, issues of race, ethnicity, and gender figure prominently in the dynamics of confraternal activity in New Spain, offering rich possibilities for investigation. For instance, Iberian confraternities often were

14 See Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. 1.

15 See especially *Manipulating the Saints*, ed. Meyers and Hopkins; *The Indian Community of Colonial Mexico*, ed. Arij Ouweneel and Simon Miller (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1990).

16 The only broad comparative study of which I am aware is Asunción Lavrin, "Rural Confraternities in the Local Economies of New Spain," in *The Indian Community of Colonial Mexico*, Arij Ouweneel and Simon Miller (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1990), 224–249.

established along racial and ethnic lines; in seventeenth-century Seville there were confraternities of black, mulattos, and gypsies, as well as brotherhoods of Genoese, Catalans, and immigrants from other regions.¹⁷ Black confraternities were also popular in the New World, where they were especially fostered by the Dominicans.¹⁸ Such ethnic confraternities were established very early in the spiritual conquest. By 1541, the Dominican monastery in Lima had already established four ethnically-oriented brotherhoods for Spaniards, natives, mulattos, and blacks, respectively.¹⁹ Especially in urban areas where various ethnic groups coexisted in close proximity, the mechanism of confraternities could be used to promote ethnic identity.

Research on confraternities in Mexico and Guatemala suggests that in some brotherhoods with largely indigenous membership, the native elite frequently, though not always, assumed leadership roles in the confraternity, implying some continuity with the pre-Hispanic hierarchy. At the same time, the nature of the imported confraternity structure provided the novel opportunity for commoners to assume positions of power that may not have been available to them under pre-Hispanic forms of social organization.

Women appear to have participated more fully in New World confraternities than they did in their Iberian counterparts. Throughout the Americas, women frequently participated as equals in the ritual activities of confraternities. There is even evidence of women leading confraternities and of the existence of exclusively female confraternities, for example, in the Andean region. The confraternity of Our Lady of Monsarratte, which was founded in the early decades of the seventeenth century in the town of Andahuaylillas in the southern Peruvian Andes, was open only to members of one sex and one age group, that of unmarried Indian women.²⁰ The equal participation of women in confraternity activities is particularly significant among the penitential groups of New Spain, where women and children participated fully in the flagellant processions of Holy Week, wearing the hooded attire of penitents and whipping themselves in expiation of their sins—activities that had been forbidden to women in Spain since the mid-15th century.²¹

17 Isidoro Moreno, *Cofradías y hermandades andaluzas* (Sevilla: Editoriales Andaluzas Unidas, 1985), 46–51.

18 See Patricia A. Mulvey, "Black Brothers and Sisters: Membership in the Black Lay Brotherhoods of Colonial Brazil," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 17:2 (1980), 253–279; idem, "Slave Confraternities in Brazil: Their Role in Colonial Society," *The Americas* 39 (1982), 39–67; A. John R. Russell-Wood, "Black and Mulatto Brotherhoods in Colonial Brazil: A Study in Collective Behavior," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54 (1974), 567–602; and Julita Scarano, "Black Brotherhoods: Integration or Contradiction," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 16:1 (1979), 1–17.

19 Meyers, 9.

20 Meyers, 7.

21 See Fr. Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (México: Porrúa, 1980), 420–421; Fr. Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Memoriales*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (México: Porrúa, 1990), 55–56; idem, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, ed.

III. An issue of current interest, one that has recently generated a great deal of debate among scholars, concerns interpretations of the teleological effect of confraternities in the spiritual conquest and colonization of the native peoples of New Spain: were they instruments of acculturation and indoctrination, or were they vehicles of resistance in which native traditions and beliefs could be safely camouflaged? There is ample evidence throughout the Americas that confraternities were the primary didactic mechanism for the dissemination of Christian doctrine and ritual. However, it seems in some cases that these groups sheltered indigenous cultural identity in a context in which almost all other pre-Hispanic cultural institutions were persecuted. Since the confraternity system was ostensibly Catholic, making it at least minimally acceptable to the Church, it offered the potential for what Murdo J. MacLeod has called a "barrier function:" that is, a barrier that protected the celebration of distinctly non-Christian rituals, such as native dances, the use of certain traditional costumes, masks and music in rituals, the continuation of feasts involving the heavy consumption of native alcoholic beverages, and the syncretic worship of sculpted images.²²

For the most part, broader studies that examine stages in the temporal evolution of confraternities over the colonial period remain to be undertaken; however, it does seem clear that the form and structure of such groups changed dramatically over time in many regions of the Americas. Certain studies suggest that initially the confraternities may have served the goals of the Spaniards, but over time they were converted to native purposes that frequently subverted their original intent.²³ Different regions reveal varying evolutionary sequences in response to changing social and historical circumstances.

IV. Syncretism is an especially interesting mechanism for interpreting the implantation of confraternities in the New World, and particularly, for assessing the development of ritual practices and visual images, since the specter of idolatry amongst the "converted" was never far from the minds of the friars and the Church in the New World. Inquisition documents record innumerable instances of idolatry throughout three centuries all over the Americas—all the friars wrote about idolatry and many, such as the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, observed and recorded native traditions in order to extirpate idolatrous practices.²⁴

Comparative studies of ritual activities reveal significant differences as well as similarities between Iberian and New World confraternities that point to the unique adaptations and transformations that occurred in the Americas. For instance, if there were coincidences of form and function between Spanish con-

Edmundo O'Gorman (México: Porrúa, 1990), 93. See also the descriptions cited in Robert Ricard, *La conquista espiritual de México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986), 288.

22 *Spanish Central America: A Socio-Economic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 328.

23 For example, Carlsen, *passim*.

24 *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, 4 vols. (México: Porrúa, 1981).

fraternities and pre-Hispanic forms of social and religious organization, similar coincidences are present in the religious rituals and visual images employed by these groups. Documented confraternity practices in the New World became a sort of palimpsest, in which Christian images and rituals often overlaid, or were fused with, those of pre-Hispanic traditions. One of the most important public manifestations of the confraternity was its celebration of feast days, usually with lavish public processions and rituals. This tradition accorded well with pre-Hispanic practices, in which outdoor worship and ritual was the dominant tradition among most groups. In Mexico, one of the most adaptive and original features the friars devised to serve the ritual needs of their Indian confraternities was the construction of the large walled *atrio* or forecourt of the monastery that served as an enclosed and protected processional and ritual arena. The *atrio* was a new and innovative feature of New World monasteries that apparently has no direct European precedent in terms of its intended New World functions.

The friars encouraged the performance of Christian rituals and processions in this walled open space before an outdoor chapel or *capilla de indios* (another New World innovation). Additional smaller chapels, known as *posas*, were often built into the corners of the walled *atrios*, and were used, among other purposes, for stops in outdoor processions.²⁵ The form and function of the rectangular walled *atrio* was coincidentally aligned to the cardinal directions, because of its relationship to the east/west orientation of the monastery church. Therefore, the *atrio* also allowed for a fusion or continuity with the pre-Hispanic symbolism of the cardinally-oriented corners of the universe, which had governed the similarly open precincts of pre-Hispanic temple sites.

It is not surprising that penitential confraternities were by far the most popular types of brotherhoods among the Indians of Mesoamerica. Traditionally, these confraternities held flagellant processions during Holy Week, flogging their bare backs with whips of cord. The widespread popularity of flagellant processions among the Indians prompted the Franciscan friar Gerónimo de Mendieta to remark that, "Among them [the Indians], he who does not carry a rosary and a flagellant whip is not considered a Christian."²⁶ The Augustinian friar Juan de Grijalva, writing in the early seventeenth century, lauded the intense devotion of the Indians to the penitential processions of Holy Week, declaring that they far exceeded the Spaniards in their numbers and in the fervour of their self-mortification.²⁷ Early visual depictions of such processions appear in several sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century mural paintings from monasteries in central Mexico, notably at San Miguel, Huejotzingo (Puebla), San Martín, Huaquechula (Puebla), and Teiticipac (Oaxaca), and offer abundant information about the form and appearance of these rituals.²⁸ The native predilection for flagellation and

25 For the novel architectural features of sixteenth-century mendicant monasteries, see John McAndrew, *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

26 "Entre ellos, parece no es cristiano el que no trae rosario y disciplina." Mendieta, 429.

27 Grijalva, 161-162.

other acts of self-mortification may on one level be seen as a continuation of the variety of pre-Hispanic traditions of ritual self-discipline. Alongside the more well-known native forms of ritual bloodletting and auto-sacrifice performed by pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican Indians, public "penitential processions" are recorded in which the population of entire towns lashed each other with ropes.²⁹

In perhaps a more occult manner, the images of saints maintained by native confraternities came to represent aspects of far more inclusive Mayan or Mexican deities, conforming to the "chameleon nature" of such pre-Hispanic gods. For example, according to Nancy Farriss, "the addition of one more guise to the multiple permutations each deity already possessed would hardly have fazed the Maya theologians."³⁰ Pre-Conquest images could also be hidden in the local church, even inside the saint's images themselves, or could be ensconced in nearby caves if necessary. Numerous pre-Conquest stone images maintain their importance among many Maya confraternities today and sculptures of Christian "saints" continue virtually to defy identification in many areas of the Maya highlands.

Each culture, indigenous and Spanish, depended and still depends on the mystic powers of ritual objects in sacred precincts. Even though the sixteenth-century friars constantly railed against "idol-worship," the Indians recognized what was plainly obvious, and quite readily accommodated their own traditional "idols" to those of the Christians. In fact, Indian response, especially among the lowland Maya of the Yucatan and the Pueblo in the U.S. southwest, was to infuse the powers of their old images into the new Christian ones, and worship the resulting syncretized image.³¹ Accordingly, a multitude of "unorthodox" practices have been recorded about the ways that Indian confraternities interacted with their Christian images, ranging from the offering of traditional substances (corn, maize beer, and copal) to the whipping and threatening of images of the saints to perform miracles and accede to demands.³² Pre-Hispanic "idols" were also customarily polychromed, clothed in woven textiles and paraded in public on shoulder-borne platforms similar to the *andas* (processional platforms) used in the religious processions of Spanish confraternities.

The visual, material evidence of Indian confraternities is abundant throughout the Americas, and yet there are few studies of such objects and their ritual functions. Christian images were introduced into the New World in order to instruct the native people and to serve as devotional objects. Extra-liturgical dramas that used sculpted images brought Christian narrative to life and

28 Susan Verdi Webster, "Art, Ritual, and Confraternities at the Monastery of San Miguel, Huejotzingo," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, in press.

29 Joseph de Acosta, *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Clements R. Markham (New York: Burt Franklin, 1964) 2:339.

30 *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 313.

31 *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 309–319.

32 Gruzinski, 219.

transcended language barriers. Over time, the images were gradually appropriated and assimilated by the indigenous people. They penetrated the personal and social existence of native groups and became a part of their individuality and of their collective life, thereby allowing in some way for the continuity of pre-Hispanic traditions. Images and objects used by the native confraternities in Latin America thus deserve careful research.

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for Confraternities in the Colonial Americas
(with special emphasis on Mexico)

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