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Discovery and Change

The Transcultural Identity in Colonial Mexico

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Introduction

A well-know joke...is the one about the Mexican who reproaches the recently arrived Spaniard and wishes to place upon his shoulders the burden of all the crimes perpetrated in the Americas by his ancestors. The Spaniard responds by reminding him that, in any event, the genocides would have been the work of the Mexican's ancestors and not his own, since his forefathers never left Spain.

-Ricardo Herren, La conquista erótica de las Indias

The above epigraph may translate into humorous witticism when told to the properly uneducated audience, but to those who have accumulated some knowledge of the history and development of Mexico, it serves more as a saddening statement, whose truth stings more than it evokes laughter. The blame-game depicted in the joke, also accompanies the historical recollection of Latin American countries, and is one for which historians and writers have not yet discovered a concrete and appropriate delinquent. Instead it remains just that, a game of ever pointing fingers onto those who are believed to be the wrongdoers and destructors of a specific land and its' people.

The epigraph serves the even more daunting purpose of bringing up, humorously or not, the concept of transculturation and the role it played in the colonial period of a freshly conquered Mexico. Why was the Conquest such a violent and harmful event? What changes and influences did it bring about in the region of Mexico? Was it an inevitable occurrence that gave violent birth to a hybrid culture? And if so, why could this culture not have been created through the peaceful coexistence and cohabitation of various cultures? To some, these questions may seem like naïve

inquiries about a past so far removed from modern society that they seem worthless to address, but on the contrary, they are rather valid questions and it is not a past so far gone, because its consequences and aftermath are still vibrantly felt in today's multicultural region of Mexico. These questions are also ones for which devoted people are still trying to come up with answers, meaning that on some level, be it personal or educational, the modern world is concerned about expanding their knowledge on the topic of transculturation in colonial Mexico.

My personal interest in the topic has lead me to inquire further into the events that lead to the drastic changes in the region, thus focusing the following paper on the development of a religiously transculturized Mexican identity during the Colonial Era. In this paper, I will demonstrate Mexican life and religious practices prior to the Conquest, mainly focusing on the Aztec traditions and war tactics. Further on, I will introduce the topic of the Conquest and Hernán Cortés' involvement with the fall of the Aztec Empire. I will also draw close attention to the religious changes that occurred as the transition from pre-colonial to conquered Mexico was made, leaving the country in a transculturized state. The paper will be divided into three parts, each of which will focus on specific topics:

Part 1- Defining Key Concept

Part 2- Pre-Colonial Mexico: the roles of Religion, War and Societal Customs in Aztec
Community

Part 3- Consequences of the Conquest and the Colonial Era in Mexico

Part 1: Defining key concepts

In order to better comprehend how the Mexican identity shifted from its indigenous culture and pre-colonial roots, to the hybrid colonial nation that it developed into during the Conquest, it is paramount to analyze and comprehend the terminology that will guide our understanding of the history in this particular region. This section will focus on defining the key terms *identity* and *hybrid identity*, *contact zone* and *transculturation*. A clear interpretation of what these terms entail will allow for a better understanding of the roles they played in the religious formation and development of colonial Mexico.

Identity is a vague term whose meaning has shifted perpetually throughout different times in history. For the purpose of this essay, the focus will be placed on defining the collective identity of a group of people, instead of the identity of the individual, because the main focus of the following sections revolves around the communal changes in Mexican identity. Collective identity is “thought of as being primordial and embedded in territory, language, kinship and blood lines.”(Smith 4) These basic components accumulate specific groups of people and give them a joint and somewhat inherent logic of pertaining to a specific community. A shift from the primordial identity to one that is “constructed from the building blocks of history, geography, biology, religion, language [and] collective memory”, leads towards a “project identity, [in which] social actors build a new identity that redefines their position in society.”(Smith 5)

As we shall see in the following sections, the Mexican identity experienced changes from that of a collective identity towards a project identity, whose formation came about due to the historical events that occurred in colonial Mexico. These two definitions of identity did not remain unchanged and intact, but rather they underwent alterations due to the actions that occurred within a specific society and the interactions with outside forces or communities. In the

case of the Mexican Conquest, the identities of the Spanish and the indigenous people were affected and altered, because these two distinct societies came into contact with one another and failed to remain purely primordial. These interactions lead the region of Mexico to develop a *hybrid identity*, in which two “cultures [transformed] each other... [creating] a binary culture”, with evident differences from the two initial societies. (Smith 10) Nevertheless, in order to arrive at a hybrid identity, cultures must first meet and interact with one another.

To define the encounter between the Spaniards and the indigenous people of Mexico as a mere concurrence that occurred many centuries ago, would not only be a historical understatement, but it would also negate the opportunity for the following definition to be developed and explained. The interactions between the two different cultures altered each in a specific way, and these adjustments are worth noticing and analyzing. The term that best explains the confluence of the European and indigenous worlds is Mary Louise Pratt's¹ “contact zone”. She describes this term to mean “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.” (Pratt 8) One party within the contact zone becomes the dominant power that attempts to control and change the subordinated group, “involving [in their takeover] conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”(Pratt 8)

The successful completion of domination over a subordinated group draws focus on establishing hierarchies, where the roles and social standings of any and all people in a particular region are clearly demonstrated and understood by everyone. Colonial Mexico was no exemption

¹ Pratt made very important and noteworthy contributions to the development of critical theory, especially in the field of Latin American studies. Her research and development on “contact zones” has been helpful in the discovery of identity changes that occurred and still occur over in Latin America.

to this practice, because its' society was divided meticulously into rigid caste systems².

“European-born Spaniards occupied the top of the social scale and held a monopoly on the greatest political and economic privilege. Below them stood the *criollos* (creoles), that is, persons born in America and claiming European (or white) ancestry. Below them stood the vast majority of the American populations, grouped according to various non-European ancestries: *indios*, *negros* (free and slave), *mestizos*, *mulatos*, *zambos*, and others.” (Pratt 15) The following map serves as a visual example of the various divisions made in colonial American societies, and depicts the diverse outcomes that resulted from the mixtures of any two races within the social hierarchy. The various outcomes of races or castes would eventually lead to the transcultured identity associated with colonial Mexico.

² Specific definitions and categories given to people within a society. Colonial Mexico had specific divisions for people, from *mestizo* (a person of mixed white European and Indian blood), *mullato* (a person of white European and African blood), all the way to rare categories like, *tente en aire con mulata*, which resulted in a category titled “no te entiendo”.



Pratt describes “transculturation as being “a phenomenon of the contact zone”, because it forms as a result of the encounter between two distinct cultures, but transculturation is as active in the development and redevelopment of a culture as identity and contact zones are. The term itself is most associated with Cuban writer and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz⁴, who states that

³ *Las Castas* Anonymous 18th century oil canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlan, Mexico. The sixteen different caste categories depicted in this painting are as follows (in Spanish): 1. Español con India, Mestizo 2. Mestizo con Española, Castizo 3. Castizo con Española, Español 4. Español con Negra, Mulato 5. Mulato con Española, Morisco 6. Morisco con Española, Chino 7. Chino con India, Salta atrás 8. Salta atrás con Mulata, Lobo 9. Lobo con China, Gíbaro (Jíbaro) 10. Gíbaro con Mulata, Albarazado 11. Albarazado con Negra, Cambujo 12. Cambujo con India, Sambiaga (Zambiaga) 13. Sambiaga con Loba, Calpamulato 14. Calpamulato con Cambuja, Tente en el Aire 15. Tente en el Aire con Mulata, No te entiendo 16. No te entiendo con India, Torna atrás

⁴ Ortiz was a Cuban writer and sociologist, who created and developed the term *transculturation* in his attempt to understand and explain the complexity that accompanied the racial multiplicity within his home country. In his book *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azúcar*, Ortiz explains the development of transculturation stating, “entendemos que el vocablo ‘transculturación’ expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transitivo de una cultura a otra, porque éste no consiste solamente en adquirir una distinta cultura, que es lo que en rigor indica la voz angloamericana ‘aculturation,’ sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse una parcial ‘desculturación,’ y además, significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse ‘neoculturación’...” (Ortiz)

transculturation “se funda esencialmente en la convivencia y los intercambios contingentes entre dos elementos en estado de competencia y conflicto.” (Ortiz 51) It is derived from “the extremely complex transmutations of culture”, where both societies involved are “always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn.” (Ortiz) It is prominent to distinguish the concept of transculturation from acculturation, which “[implies] the unidirectional imposition of one dominant culture upon another”, which usually results in the subordinated groups adapting to the cultures of their dominators. (Hernandez 67) Deculturation, occurs when a culture, in most cases the dominated one, loses certain aspects of its culture over time, due to continuous interaction with a dominating group. Though the three definitions intertwine and complement each other, they do vary in meaning and are not synonyms for one another. The process of transculturation depicts “human groups [who are] all in a state of transition”, and is “fundamental and indispensable for understanding”, in this case, Mexican culture and history. (Ortiz)

The following section will exhibit the initial identity of pre-colonial Mexico, and the various cultural components that shaped it. It will thoroughly describe the Aztec and pre-colonial lifestyle of the indigenous people of Mexico. Special attention will be drawn to religious practices and their influence on the culture. Section three of the paper will focus on the transcultural identify that formed as an aftermath of the Conquest and colonial years. The primary focus of this section is to demonstrate the inevitable outcome of a hybrid identity and transformed religion after Cortés’ Mexican Conquest.

Part Two: Pre-colonial Mexico: the roles of Religion, War, and Social

Customs in the Aztec Community

Prior to being altered into a nation-state that would submissively fall under the control of its European conquerors, Mexico was “a congeries of empires, city-states and stateless people.”(Knight xi) This collection of land was home to numerous tribes over varying periods of time, ranging from the Mayas to the Aztecs, among copious others. The different societies that called this land their home, ruled, fought against, and sometimes lived in congruence, with one another. The region of Mexico had its own forms of government systems, networks, and regimes that were developed and maintained over time, until they were disintegrated altogether during the Conquest and the Colonial period. The region itself was divided into “ethnic states”, known as “*altepetl*”, “each of which had its own political subdivisions and social constituencies.” (Schroeder 2)

Within each of these ethnic states, importance was placed on keeping the *altepetl* intact, and on the development and maintenance of loyalty to the polity, or state⁵. If an overthrow or domination of a certain *altepetl* occurred in the region of Mexico, the “entity” or *altepetl* would continue to “operate as before, as long as the traditional royal rulership was intact.”(Schroeder 2) Certain kinships were developed and carried out, even when the destruction of any of the *altepetl* occurred. Due to these relationships, integration between the different tribes took place, allowing for marriages between the diverse groups. When compared to the tactical approach of the Spaniards and the outcomes of the Conquest (which will be examined in the following section), it can be inferred that pre-colonial Mexican societies, while still encountering and executing

⁵ Schroeder, Susan. *The Conquest All Over Again*. Sussex Academic Press, Oregon. 2010. Schroeder discusses the importance of the *altepetl* or “ethnic states” in the introduction of her book to shed light on the fact that social identity throughout the pre-colonial region of Mexico depended on this concept.

violent feuds with one another, managed to respect, more so than the Spaniards, the ethnic states and variety that existed throughout the region. This section will focus on discussing the social customs, specifically religious and war (battle) practices, which were developed and performed in pre-colonial Mexico.

Religion and its Practices:

Variety and diversity stemmed all through pre-colonial Mexico, leaving a noteworthy mark on religion in the area. Various regions included different religious deities that were unique to each ethnic state or tribe, over time. Some of the most recognized and celebrated of these gods were *Huitzilopochtli*, *Coatlicue*, and *Quetzalcoatl*⁶, who played significant roles in the Aztec empire and religion. Pre-Columbian Mexico was a region wealthy in religious dominance and practice, because the “religious beliefs of people determined their politics, their day by day activities and their art in all its manifestations.”(Burland 4) The devotion to their gods and the strong fondness of their histories and powers, allowed the Aztecs to live a spiritually accomplished life, which included the worshiping of multiple gods, all of whom held an importance of some kind to the people and the land.

Agricultural gods had to be pleased in order for the people to receive nourishment in the form of food, thus making gods like *Chicomecoatl* (the maize goddess) an essential power in the Aztec religion. Receiving the blessing of favorable weather conditions also played a paramount role in pre-colonial times; therefore the *Tlalocs* (the mountain gods who controlled the rains,

⁶ Burland, C.A. *The Gods of Mexico*. G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York. 1967. Burland includes an alphabetical list of the major Aztec Gods and their powers. Huitzilopochtli was the tribal god of the Aztecs who was mostly associated with war and young men. His translated name is “Blue Hummingbird on the Left.” Coatlicue, or “the Serpent Lady”, is associated with food and is visually depicted as the devouring mother, who is at once the womb and the grave. Quetzalcoatl, the “Precious Twin”, is linked to priestly life and self-sacrifice in penitence. He was also the first lord of the Toltecs and was also a god of the winds and the breath of life.

lakes, rivers and water supply) ranked high on the list of gods to keep content. *Tlazolteotl*, also known as the earth goddess, was in charge of providing the indigenous peoples with fertile enough land that would be able to grow corn, and other staple crops, necessary for the survival of the people. Among the previously mentioned gods, the Aztec and pre-Aztec cultures worshiped numerous others⁷, all of whom held a specific power or control over the natural land, and whose contentment had to be brought about in order to receive the desired contents that they supplied the people and the land with. This encouraged the pre-colonial people of the region to give offerings and prayers to their gods, in order to receive from them what they needed. Some methods of keeping the gods satisfied were more extreme than others.

The sacrificial practices executed in pre-Columbian religions were, and still are to some extent, viewed as grotesque and unnecessary actions. Perhaps they can be made sense of or better assessed, if one attempts to understand the reason for which they occurred in pre-colonial Mexico. As mentioned before, the multitudinous deities of the indigenous people were worshiped on a very subjective level, making them a vital part of the personal lives of every societal member. Human sacrifice was the main focus of most religious ceremonies⁸, sacrificing servants, children, women, captured enemies, and on rare occasions, priests⁹, “for the honor of the gods and the benefit of man.”(Burland 118) By giving blood to the gods, people were able to receive elements such as rain, food, and spiritual guidance, which they considered to be fundamental fragments for their survival. To the indigenous people the gods were not evil

⁷ Thomson, J. Eric. *Mexico Before Cortez*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York. 1933. Thomson mentions numerous gods that stemmed of importance for the Aztec people, and the powers that each of them contained. Some of the other gods he included in his book were the sky gods like *Tonatiuh* (god of the sun), and the rulers of the underworld like *Mictlantecutli* (the abode of the dead).

⁸ During the religious ceremonies the victim was usually dressed in the costume of the deity whose festival was celebrated. He or she would be laid on the sacrificial stone, usually in a state of ecstasy. Parts of the body would be cut into pieces and given to the populace, who in turn believed that they were eating the spirit of the god. (Burland)

⁹ According to Burland’s research, it was very unlikely for a priest to be chosen for a sacrifice, unless he belonged to the military order.

entities, who wanted to see them suffer, because they too partook in the sacrificial process. “The gods were given the best that mankind had to offer [and] in turn for this tragic offering [they] entered the body of the victim, so that in some manner they were sacrificed to themselves.”(Burland 118)

The symbiotic relationship between the people and their gods was strengthened as a result of the human sacrifices (killings). It brought the earth bound people and their deities to a close terrain, where the presence of one was felt by the other. The belief that the gods were present in the body and the flesh of the sacrificed individual allowed the humans to touch, feel, and eat a tangible part of their gods, depicting a much internalized form of intimacy between the two. According to numerous authors¹⁰ who have investigated the history and development of Mexican religion, the act of sacrificing a human for the sake of pleasing one’s god was not believed to be a negative component of pre-colonial religions. Burland states in his research that, “the whole concept [of] [sacrifice] was not [that] of a supreme deity pouting out good things from the kindness of his heart, but [that] [of] a stern nature who had the same kind of mortality as a good chief, exacting service in return for favor.”(Burland 119) An inference can be made from this quote that the gods acted not only as leaders to the people (alive and sacrificed), but that through their interactions with the humans, during the sacrifices and in everyday life, they reminded them of their own human limits and of where they belonged on the social spectrum; beneath the gods. This kind of interaction distinguished levels of hierarchies between earth bound people and their gods, making the latter superior to the former.

¹⁰ Burland, and Thomson both agree that the human sacrifices of the pre-Columbians are not to be viewed as negative rituals of an uncultured society, but rather as valid components of the belief systems that were practiced in Mexico at that time.

Representing the gods as “good chiefs”, who were capable of both rewarding and penalizing their devotees, references the concept of duality within the Aztec religion. The dual characteristic is primarily associated with *Ometeotl*,¹¹ “the great bisexual creator deity”, whose name translates to “Dual Divinity.”(Coe 205) The concept of duality is perhaps one of the most important aspects of Aztec religion because it instills the idea previously mentioned by Burland, that gods were not all kind and caring towards the humans but rather, that they possessed within their powers the abilities to nurture and harm those who worshiped them. Incorporating two faced gods into their religion and worshiping their duality paved the path for Aztec people to feel close to their gods, due to the human qualities they exhibited. Perhaps it is not easily understood by outsiders why the Aztecs worshiped idols that seemed to possess the same flaws as humans, but they did so anyway, and they felt no remorse in sacrificing human lives to keep their gods happy. After all, most, if not all religions encourage their followers to keep their higher powers pleased by performing prayers, practicing good charity, or partaking in rituals of a less conventional manner. The following image depicts the act of sacrificing a man in Aztec society, in order to offer his heart to the gods.

¹¹ Coe, Michael D. *Mexico: from the Olmecs to the Aztecs*. Thames and Hudson, New York.2008. *Ometeotl* is responsible for the birth of the four *Tezcatlipocas* (the four cardinal directions, into which many Mesoamerican cultures divided the earth). The reason they were born/created, according to Coe and Koonts, is because of the sexual opposition that was embodied in *Ometeotl*.



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It is not my intention to portray the previously mentioned practices as positive components in Mesoamerican religions, nor do I wish to encourage their revival in modern religious practices. They were described and investigated in this section, in order to depict their value and to demonstrate the influence that they incited on the pre-colonial populations of

¹² Codex Mendoza (c.1541-2), fol. 65r. Original found at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Shelfmark. This copy was obtained from the following website: http://clio.missouristate.edu/chuchiak/HST%20350--Theme%203--Aztec_religious_rituals.htm, where other visual examples of human sacrifice are displayed.

Mexico. Human sacrifice was not just a part of religion to the indigenous people, but rather it served as a natural part of life, and as Thomson states in his book, “it cannot be too often reiterated that human sacrifice was man’s side of the bargain with the gods. Man gave life to have life.”(Thomson 168) Grasping some comprehension on the topic of human sacrifice and the role it played in the lives of the pre-Columbians, will serve a functional purpose when the act is further discussed in the following section, as seen through the eyes of the conquerors.

The Art of War:

Proud of itself

Is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán.

Here no one fears to die in war.

This is our glory...

Who could conquer Tenochtitlán?

Who could shake the foundation of heaven?¹³

Though religious practices in pre-colonial Mexico incorporated killings of humans, the act of going to and participating in wars utilized violence in a drastically surpassing measure. Pre-colonial Mexico has been described as a “series of savage and destructive frays between the warriors of one little state and another.”(Burland 48) The little state that would eventually gain

¹³ “Cantares mexicanos.” Trans. Miguel Leon Portilla in his *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*. The quote depicts a strong feeling of confidence exhibited by Aztec warriors and shows their loyalty to their land, the city of Tenochtitlán. I included it as the introduction to this section because it perfectly demonstrates the boldness with which Aztec warriors entered their battles and the manner in which they glorified the concept of war itself.

great power over the others was that of the Aztecs. These people, who dominated central Mexico at the arrival of the conquistadores, were designed to go to war. Though they were late comers in the migration process, having spent many years in unfavorable conditions, eventually they too realized their warfare capabilities and put them to use¹⁴.

As the Aztec empire expanded throughout the vast geographical regions of Mexico, value was placed on raising and training warriors who could fight in and survive vigorous battles against any and all enemies. Boys, from the age of eleven, would attend “Houses of Youth”, which served as training camps for military combat. The young men were expected to master a range of masculine skills and every *calpulli*¹⁵ had one of these training centers, where the young men who attended them were also expected to learn “everyday skills, like fishing, hunting, and brewing and selling.”(Clendinnen 9) In addition to raising warriors, the Aztecs believed in a well rounded education for their children, thus incorporating into their instruction skills that would prove useful away from the battlefield, as much as those that would protect them from their enemies.

The early onset into the adult world was an inevitable event that would occur for every young man in the Aztec community. For those who would become warriors, the grooming into strong and fit soldiers was not procrastinated because the act of fighting in a war was a tremendously praiseworthy honor for all men, young and old. Due to the complexity of the Aztec war techniques, an early introduction to the concept was considered appropriate because it would

¹⁴ Clendinnen, Inga. *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society*. Cambridge University Press, New York. 2010. Clendinnen draws attention to the marginalized conditions under which the Aztecs lived prior to settling in the south-west lands near Lake Texcoco. *Azcapotzalco* was impressed with their *chinampa* agricultural system and thus gave them permission to migrate from slums they were living in. (Clendinnen,7)

¹⁵ The Aztec word for lineage group, or small community.

allow for sufficient time to groom and train the warriors to-be. The meticulous manner in which the Aztecs were taught to fight resembles the act itself to an art form. Their purpose of going into battle was not to merely kill their enemies, but rather, warriors were awarded and moved up in rank as a result of how they killed or captured their enemies, and for the physical appearances of their opponents. Clendinnen discusses the process of advancement in Aztec Mexico, stating that “movement through the ranks of the warrior grades depended on taking alive on the field of battle a number of captives of a specified quality.” (Clendinnen 10) Though the quantity of the kill played an important role in the Aztec community, the quality of the capture or kill was notably emphasized upon as well. Below is an illustration of warrior-priests in various regalia, awarded for taking between one and six captives. The codex demonstrates the various additions to the attire of the warriors, which expands in color, texture, and volume as the number of kills increases. The six differing levels of military achievement are shown from left to right, and each promotion alters the look of the warriors. A first level warrior wears a simple *ichcahuipilli*¹⁶, eventually wearing a *tlahuiztli*¹⁷ as he moves up in levels.

¹⁶ A quilted armour jacket given to warriors who are just starting out in their fighting experience.

¹⁷ A tightly fitting body suit, usually decorated with feathers and colors to indicate the level of the warrior.



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Creativity was a prominent component of Aztec warfare and the communities' warriors embarked on various missions in order to find other humans that would be sacrificed to the gods. Even when they were not feuding with an enemy tribe, the Aztec warriors would look for reasons to fight against neighboring societies in their famous *guerras floridas*¹⁹. The main purpose of these wars was for the Aztecs to fight against a neighboring tribe, as though they were in a real battle, in order to provide candidates for their sacrificial ceremonies. These scheduled wars served as a form of preparation for the real wars that would occur, giving warriors the

¹⁸ Codex Mendoza (c.1541-2), fol. 65r. Original found at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Shelfmark: MS. Arch. Selden. AS. This copy was obtained from Clendinnen's book *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society*.

¹⁹ Spanish for "wars of flowers". Burland states that the name of the flower wars was poetically flourished due to the holy flowers which are associated with the deity of the sun eagle. The wars were really hunts for human hearts that would be offered to the gods.

chance to improve and perfect their fighting strategies during these exercises. The goal of each warrior was to “not [damage] his opponent too severely, [since] there [was] no honor to be won by killing in the field.”(Clendinnen 23) The purpose of these wars was to provide prisoners with beating hearts to the gods. In order to avoid killing their opponents in the battlefield, Aztec warriors had to be cautious with the choice and use of their weapons. During the Flower Wars they used clubs with both sharp and dull edges, but “there was an initial preference for using the flat side of the club to stun, resorting to the cutting edges only when faced with a singularly difficult opponent.” (Clendinnen 23)

As previously mentioned, the Aztecs preferred to bring their prisoners back to Tenochtitlán alive because it was more significant for their rituals if the hearts of their detainees were beating prior to sacrifice. However, the favorable outcome of capturing enemies alive was not always easily attained by the Aztecs. Sometimes, much like in any unpredictable situation, such as war, the captured men did not comply with the orders given to them by the Aztecs. This resulted in varying outcomes for the captured men. “If a warrior were captured he met the most glorious of deaths in direct sacrifice to the Sun. If he lived he gained renown. If he were slain, he was cremated, an honor reserved only for fighting men, and passed on the special heaven where warriors dwell.”(Vaillant 183) Even though the Aztecs preferred live prisoners, they paid dues to the ones who passed before their eyes and on their swords. The most common choice of weapon that the Aztecs incorporated into their battles was the *macuahuitl*²⁰, which was accessorized with “razor-sharp obsidian blades, spears...and barbed and fletched darts.”(Coe 204) This weapon, with its numerous incorporations, served as a multipurpose tool in the Flower Wars and other

²⁰ A sword-club. The same kind of club that was used las *Guerras Floridas*.

Aztec battles. If other weapons, such as shields and armor were needed, they could be found in the *tlacochcalco*²¹, which were built and stocked with weapons in all the Aztec tribes.

The greatest honor a warrior could gain was by ascending to become a “formidable Eagle or Jaguar warrior, [dressed] in cotton-padded feathers and pelts, fighting in the shadow of totemic animals.”(Alves 43) The connection between warriors and these two animals can be connected to the physical appearances of these wild creatures and the strength they exhibit. It was not unusual for the Aztecs to associate their strongest and most talented warriors with animals that rank high on the survival chain of the natural world. This kind of grouping is still in practice in today’s competitive societies because it helps develop a strong morale within an individual or an entire community. Aztecs described the two creatures most closely associated with their warriors in the following terms: “the eagle is fearless...it can gaze into, it can face the sun...it is brave, daring, a wing-beater, a screamer...[and] the lordly jaguar [is] cautious, wise, proud [and] reserved.”(Clendinnen 24) If a warrior was skilled enough to obtain the same behavioral qualities as the eagle or the jaguar, he not only served on the highest rank but he also received praise and others looked up to him. That kind of honor was desired and worked towards by every warrior in the Aztec community. The following image depicts four warriors in their battledresses and is a clear indicator of the extreme details and symbolism involved in the Aztec war gear.

²¹ The arsenal where military supplies were stored. The words’ literal translation is “house of darts”.



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The courage to fight in battles and to strategically capture opponents seems to have been an innate trait within the Aztec community. The role of a well functioning male in Aztec society was connected to how well he honored his fellow people and his gods in battles against his enemies. The glorification of violence, on the battlefield and within communal corridors, served as an inspiration to the warriors, whose loyalty to society was established and declared during times of war, and through violence. The chief purpose of entering the battlefield was to capture and defeat enemies, whose bloodshed would satisfy and nourish the various gods of the Aztec people. Attire, such as the comprehensive and colorful bodysuits depicted in the codices, did not

²² Codex Mendoza 9c.1541-2), fol. 67r. Original located at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Shelfmark:MS.Arch. Selden.AS. This copy was obtain from Clendinnen's book *The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society*.

merely serve the purpose of protecting the Aztec warriors but also revealed personal stories of the men and served as a visual representation of the credentials that each warrior accumulated in battle. Prosperity within the Aztec community was linked to military success, thus serving as a motivation to fight, capture, and kill those who came into opposition with the well trained and well equipped Aztec warriors.

Stepping into the world of pre-colonial Mexico and analyzing the fundamental beliefs and practices of the Aztec society, has hopefully exhibited a certain apprehension of its people and culture over a specific time frame. The world described in this section was one that gave rise to warriors, who fought with perseverance in order to obtain and maintain their fighter status. It was also a world that brought about a religious community, whose aspirations to please their gods led them to take unique but extreme measures in their religious practices. The behaviors exhibited in the private lives of pre-colonial Mexicans incorporated themselves into the communal lifestyles of the populace, making violence and the act of killing a shared trait among religion and war: religion based human sacrifices and the battlefield included many of the same practices, proving an overwhelming importance for death and violence in pre-colonial Mexico.

Perhaps it may be difficult for some to understand how loyalty and care for a community and its numerous gods could have been demonstrated through the use of such extreme violence. To those who would make contact with the Aztecs in the 1500's, the above mentioned lifestyle was neither understood nor tolerated. Due to this lack of comprehension and unwillingness to try, the life and culture described in this section was altered, losing certain components that made it unique, and gaining others, that lead to a new and transculturized Mexico.

Part Three: Consequences of the Conquest and the Colonial Era in Mexico

The religious practices and overall style of living exhibited by the pre-colonial people did not withstand the test of time. As interest in the different regions of the New World grew at a fast pace, European expeditions set sail and embarked on journeys that would lead to the discovery of new lands and people. The following section investigates how contact with the Spaniards induced changes in almost every aspect of the indigenous lifestyle and discusses the impact of the transformations that occurred during the Colonial Era. The religious practices described before, will be reintroduced as they were interpreted by the Spaniards. Introducing the Spanish view of the indigenous lifestyle and practices will help clarify why certain changes were impossible to avoid. Though conquests occurred all throughout the region of Mexico, the primary focus of this section is the fall of the Aztec Empire and the religious changes that came about when Hernán Cortés²³ and his conquistadors arrived in Tenochtitlan.

The Encounter:

*And so it is that I am embarking
upon a great and beautiful enterprise,
which will be famous in times to come,
because I know in my heart that we shall*

²³ Jackson, Brien. *Invasion and Transformation*. University Press of Colorado. 2008. "Hernán Cortés (1485-1547) is one of the most legendary and controversial figures in the annals of early modern European and American colonial history. His inconceivable Conquest of Mexico with a few hundred Spanish soldiers and thousands of indigenous allies became a paradigm of heroism, ingenuity, and atrocity within his own lifetime." (Jackson, 57)

*take vast and wealthy lands, peoples such
as have never before been seen,
and kingdoms greater than those
of our monarchs.²⁴*

In 1518, Hernán Cortés received permission from Diego De Velázquez²⁵ to lead an expedition to Mexico and to carry the title of governor while on the journey. Though this permission was revoked by Velázquez, Cortés continued on his voyage nonetheless, and sailed his way to Mexico, making his first arrival on the coast of the Yucatan. By August 1519, the conquistadors made their way to Tlaxcala, “a Nahua city, where, after weeks of negotiation, the Spaniards sealed an alliance with the Tlaxcalans.”(Prescott 27) After the alliance was established, Cortés and his men headed to the region of Cholula. “The major civilization in the region, however, was that of the Aztecs, lead by Montezuma II. After a three-month journey over difficult terrain, Cortés arrived in the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, in November 1519.”(Prescott 27) During their travels through the Aztec Empire, the Spaniards encountered Montezuma, who gave them shelter, food, clothing, gold, and frequent opportunities to meet with him in order to carry out conversations.

The interactions that occurred between the Spaniards and the indigenous people direct our focus back to the earlier defined “contact zone”, where two cultures clash and struggle with

²⁴ Carman, Glen. *Rhetorical Conquests*. Purude University Press, Indiana. 2006. The introduction includes the first speech that Cortés gave to his troops. The translation into English was made by López de Gómara in his book *Historia de la conquista de México*. I included this quote because I feel that it precisely demonstrates the confidence with which Cortés embarked on his journey. It also foreshadows the cultural struggle that would arise due to the encounter between the Spaniards and the indigenous people of Mexico.

²⁵ Velázquez was the governor of Cuba at the time that Cortés left for Mexico. When he revoked his decision to send the voyage to Mexico, Cortés relied on the financial support of the Spanish Crown to keep his travels going.

one another, resulting in the control of one group over the other. In order to establish a dominant-submissive relationship, one group has to succeed in the domination of the other, even though both are observing and judging each other, looking for differences in any and all aspects of their lives. The encounters that occurred in Mexico between 1519 and 1521²⁶ were no exception to this complex process, because the struggle for control presented itself as soon as contact between the Spaniards and the natives occurred. Before Cortés and his men even encountered the Aztecs, they were aware of their existence and strength as a powerful civilization that resided somewhere in the interior of Mexico. It would only be natural that, after conquering and defeating various other tribes²⁷, the Spaniards made their way to Tenochtitlan and encountered the people they would find themselves struggling in a contact zone with.

Upon their arrival into Tenochtitlan, the conquistadors witnessed the different lifestyles of the Aztecs from a firsthand experience. The barrier between the two cultures existed in all factors of life, ranging from the difference in languages between the two, to the unique physical appearances exhibited by the indigenous people. The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl, had different skin colors from the Spaniards, and wore drastically different clothing (revealing their bodies in a more seductive and free manner, visibly displaying their pierced and painted bodies). Prescott gives a vivid description of one of the first encounters between various Aztec caciques and the Spaniards, focusing in great detail on the appearances of the indigenous people. He writes: “They were dressed in the fanciful gala costume of the country, with the *maxtlatl*, or cotton sash, around their loins and a broad mantle of the same material...flowing gracefully down their

²⁶ Various historians have come to the conclusion that the most crucial years during the various conquests were those between 1519 and 1521. According to Carman, Cortés and his men landed on the coast of Mexico on April 22, 1519 and on August 13, 1521 the fall of the Aztec Empire was well on its way.

²⁷ The Spaniards had already taken control over the region of Tabasco and had successfully executed a military victory over the Chontal-Mayan speaking people of Pontonchan. (Carman,20)

shoulders. On their necks and arms they displayed collars and bracelets of turquoise mosaic...while their ears, under-lips, and occasionally their noses, were garnished with pendants formed of precious stones, or crescents of fine gold.”(Prescott 29)

The visible differences between the two cultures continued to reveal themselves when Cortés and his men met Montezuma for the first time. The descriptions of the emperor and the care with which people treated him were closely noted by the conquistadors²⁸. When the Spaniards first met Montezuma, they were taken back by the tremendous communal effort exhibited to protect the man and the strong attempts at keeping the emperor happy. Montezuma was carried in a carriage on the shoulders of his servants and when he stepped out of it “the attendants strewed the ground with cotton tapestry, [so] that his imperial feet might not be contaminated by the rude soil.”(Prescott 30) The respect and devotion that were given to the emperor revealed a strong bond between the indigenous people and their leader. It also resembled the closely linked bonds that existed between the Aztecs and their various religious deities, to which the Spaniards did not warm up to.

Perhaps the most shocking and unfathomable difference between the conquistadors and the indigenous people was the divide in religious practices and worship choices that existed between the two distinct cultures. The act of praying to multiple gods and having idols of varying types was not easily understood by the Spanish conquistadors, but the acts of human sacrifice that were associated with religious practices were truly despised. As mentioned before, writers and historians still exhibit ignorance when discussing this specific religious practice. Those who wrote about it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also displayed a firmly

²⁸ Prescott, William H. *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. Continuum International Publishing, London. 2009. Prescott describes in very specific detail the physical appearance of Montezuma and the way that people avoided making direct eye contact with him as a sign of respect. (p30-33)

negative outlook on the topic of human sacrifice. In his account from 1612, Peter Martyr²⁹ wrote of the human sacrifices which took place in Aztec communities prior to and well into Cortés' arrival. His descriptions of the practices were not favorable and they mirrored those of the Spaniards' when they first witnessed acts of human sacrifice. Martyr states:

*“But oh cruell wickedness, oh horrible barbarousness,
they teare in peeces so many boyes and girles,
or so many svaes, before the meale which is to be baked,
while they draw so much blood... these
sacrifices are not slaine, by cutting of the throat,
but by thrusting a knife through the short ribs neer unto the hart, so
that their hart is pulled out, to be sacrificed while they be
yet living and behold their own miserable condition...
The priests perswade the people to be acceptable to their Idols.”³⁰*

Martyr's explicit description of Aztec human sacrifice was one among many, and much like most accounts depicting the religious killings, it did not focus on understanding their meaning or grasping their importance to the indigenous people. As was mentioned in the previous section, the killings served a deeper purpose for the Aztecs and were not just a mere practice of human torture. Nevertheless, the Spaniards (and other Europeans) who chose to write on the topic of pre-Columbian religion, found themselves degrading the practices and associating them with devil like and evil possessed spirits. Cortés himself focused on portraying a negative

²⁹ A historian of Spain and the discoveries made in the New World. In 1520, Charles V commissioned his role as a *cronista* who would write about the explorations in the New World.

³⁰ Thomson, Eric J. *Mexico Before Cortez*. (p 166-167) Martyr captures the negative essence attached to the human sacrifices, as driven by his own preconceived notions on what constitutes religion and religious acts. (this was one of the earliest sources on human sacrifice, and I included the original version, with its' original spelling)

image of the Aztecs in his letters to Emperor Charles V, centering them on “[conveying] the horror of a mode of annihilation heretofore unknown to the Christian world.”(Brienen 58) In order to gain the support he needed for his eventual domination over Tenochtitlan, Cortés needed to ensure that the indigenous people were portrayed in a negative religious light, which did not exhibit the same moral practices as Christianity. In one of his letters intended to update the Crown on the invasions and attacks in the central Mexican region, he wrote, “as Christians we were obliged to wage war against the enemies of our Faith; and thereby we would win glory in the next world and, in this, greater honor and renown than any generation before our time.”(Brienen 61)

This kind of religious intolerance was quickly revealed to Montezuma himself and became the main reason for which the Spaniards claimed to have sailed to the region of Mexico. In one of their meetings, Cortés declared to the emperor that “the idols he worshiped were Satan under different forms...[and] [that] the bloody sacrifices [he] imposed [on] [people]...would sink him in perdition.”(Prescot 40) The conquistador attempted numerous times³¹ to convince the emperor of the wrongdoings associated with his religion, and further insinuated that the conversion to Christianity would relieve the emperor and his people from these “evil spirits...[that] [were] representatives of the Devil.”(Prescott 49) The negotiation between Cortés and Montezuma was an unsuccessful one, due to the emperor’s unwillingness to accept the religious views of the Christians, and the conquistador’s reluctance to validate as reasonable the religious practices of the Aztecs. The battle between the idols and the Holy Cross was not one of mere words and disagreements, but rather, it would lead the two opposing sides into a bigger and

³¹ Prescott mentions Cortés’ attempt to place crosses in certain temples in Tenochtitlan, as a way to reform the Indians, but this notion was not well received by Montezuma.

more complex clash, whose exclusive purpose would center on the collapse of the Aztec religion and overall empire.

The Art of War No More:

*“In the last bitter struggle
the flower of the Aztecs fell and withered
in the ruins of their great and terrible city.”³²*

The fighter reputation, for which the Aztecs accumulated great fame over the years, eventually came to an end in August of 1521³³. After months of fighting and bloody deaths (death tolls ranking high on both sides of the battle), failed attempts at conquering and converting indigenous people, and the losses of many of his own men and allies, Cortés finally took over Tenochtitlan.³⁴ Having eliminated Montezuma³⁵ and seized control over Cuauhtémoc³⁶, the battle over Mexico had come to an end, leaving as victors the Spanish men and allies who fought under the command of Hernán Cortés. The victory came at a price which included deaths of over thirty thousand Texoco warriors, various hundreds of Spanish soldiers, and more than two hundred forty thousand Mexicans, most of whom were of noble blood and

³² Burland, C.A. *The Gods of Mexico*.(p3)

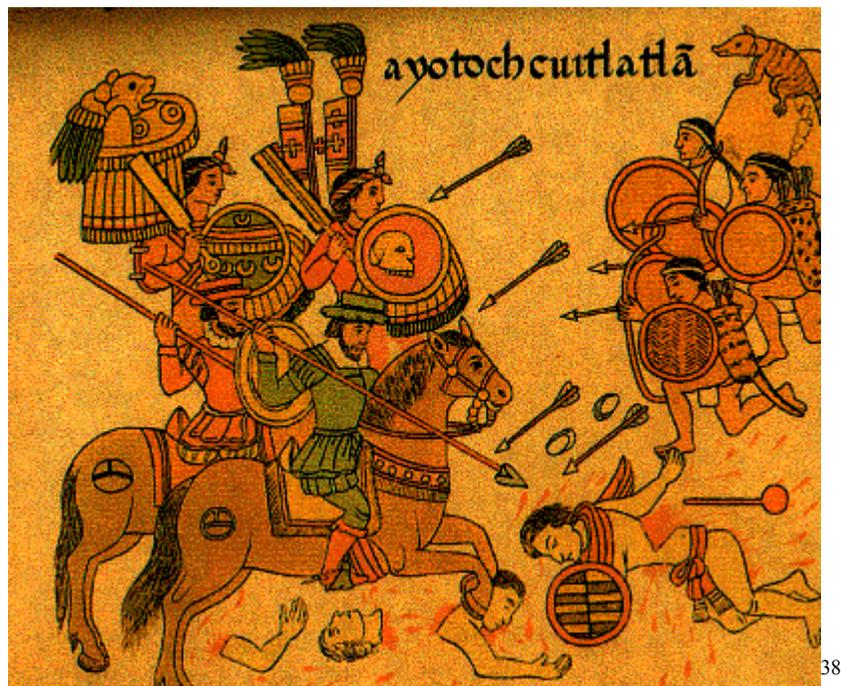
³³ The actual date that Cortés took over Tenochtitlan is said to be August 13, 1521.

³⁴ Ballentine, Douglass. *Ally of Cortes*. Texas Western Press,1969. Chapter iii of the book, titled “The Siege of Mexico-Tenochtitlan” focuses on describing the various battles fought in detail.

³⁵ Cortés held the emperor prisoner, tied him up and left him to struggle, and his people to watch him perish under the control of the Spaniards.

³⁶ The ruler of Tenochtitlan, at the time of the Conquest.

status.³⁷ The following image depicts a battle between the Spaniards and the indigenous warriors, and is just one visual example of the numerous battles that took place during the Conquest of Mexico. It is noteworthy to detect the differences in armor and battle gear between the two sides, and the disadvantages of the Aztecs, who did not have the privilege of fighting with horses, like their opponents, the Spaniards did. The image is also an example of the defeat suffered by the Aztecs, as native warriors' body parts lie dismantled and blood induced on the foreground of the painting.



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³⁷ Ballentine, Douglass. (p53)

³⁸ Ballentine, Douglass. *Ally of Cortes*. Texas Western Press, 1969. The original copy of this painting is located in the Florentine Codex.

The tortures committed by the Spaniards have been described as horrific, heartless, brutal, and inexplicable³⁹. The character of the Spanish man, in regards to the Mexican Conquest, has been described as “ruthless, pragmatic, single-minded, and superbly rational in his manipulative intelligence.”(Clendinnen 50) The allies who aided Cortés in his battle against the Aztecs, and who assisted in the tortures and killings of men, children, and women, were rewarded for their help in payments of gold and silver. “The Tlazcalans, Huexotzincans, and Cholulans said goodbye to [Cortés]...and went to their lands rich and content.”(Ballentine 53) But at what cost did they receive this wealth, and these treasures? The gripping truth is that the formation of enemies against the Aztecs ranged not only within the circles of the Spanish conquistadores, but also within various indigenous tribes, whose fear of being overpowered and controlled by the Aztecs brought them closer to the Spaniards. As these allies (along with their gold and silver) made their way back to their “homes”, the remainder of the indigenous people left under Spanish control, were introduced to new forms of lifestyles, including that of a new language and a new religion. What remained in the hands of the Spaniards was a conquered nation of people, who were encouraged (forced) to part ways with the past they knew and desired. The evangelization that had been longed for, and fought over, was at its’ birth stages, and the natives of Mexico were the ones who would be altered into the “Christians” that Cortés and the Crown wanted them to be.

³⁹ In the book *Mexico from the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, authors Coe and Koontz mention that Spaniards exaggerated the number of human sacrifices and deaths committed by the Aztecs in order to justify their own violence and aggression against the natives of the New World. (p204-205)

Reconstructing the Face of Religion:

*“Religion is a notoriously protean beast,
resistant to being pinned down,
and all strategies are finally inadequate.”⁴⁰*

The religious transformation that occurred in colonial Mexico did not come about easily or without harm. The gradual steps towards a Christian lifestyle were taken in association with violence, turning the religious conversion in Mexico into a war of its' own. The Franciscan friars, who were in charge of evangelizing the indigenous people in Mexico, “were horrified to learn that many of their most trusted native assistants had continued to organize surreptitious pagan rites” even after the destruction of their idols.(Miller, Ouweneel 184) The Spaniards built churches on the sites of former temples and placed crosses on mountain tops in order to display visual representations of the Christian faith all throughout the region of Mexico. However, when these changes failed to prevent the natives from their idol worshipping and human sacrifices, other, more drastic measures had to be taken in order to guide them towards the Christian path.

This kind of fury lead the Spaniards to employ violent tactics in order to keep the natives from returning to their devil associated religions. According to various testimonies, “men were hung up, whipped and burnt with lighted tapers, with fifteen individuals dying from their torment and many others left permanently crippled; a handful [preferring] suicide rather than the [submission] to torture.” (Miller,Ouweneel 184) Any actions that mirrored the pre-colonial

⁴⁰ Clendinnen. (p123) I included this epigram because it precludes the transculturized religion that would be practiced in post-colonial Mexico.

worships and practices were seen as threats to the Spaniards and as regression by the natives. The bishops forbade the Indians “to make unseemly music in the churches... [because] such performances were inappropriate in Christina worship, and smacked of idolatry.”(Clendinnen 131) If any forms of indigenous memorabilia were discovered in the homes of the natives, “they were to give up [these] private oratories and images,” as to not be tempted by their presence.(Clendinnen 131) Though the battle for geographical Mexico had been won, the constantly altering fight for spiritual control over the land was still in progress.

When discussing the changes that occurred in Mexican religion, it is vital that our attention be returned to Ortiz’ concept of transculturation. As was stated earlier, transculturation occurs when various characteristics from two separate cultures are combined, thus resulting in the formation of a distinct new culture. In the case of colonial Mexico, the battle between Christianity and the indigenous religions was not clearly won by either side. Instead, distinct practices of the two religions were integrated into the lives of the Mexicans, making the religious transformation in the region a very appealing topic for historians and commoners alike. As Ortiz described, the constant battle that the two varying cultures found themselves in, was one where neither could come out the champion because they were simultaneously exhibiting influence upon each other. The pure success of acculturation or deculturation was rarely, if ever, achieved in colonial Mexico, due to the continuing problem of miscommunication between the two cultures. Even after the indigenous people were taught to write, read and speak the Spanish language, they still found themselves struggling with the adaption of certain religious concepts. To shed some defense light on the indigenous people, the confusion that occurred in regards to religious conversion left many unsure about what to believe in and what to abolish from their

religions. “If Mexican [idols] came to be luxuriously manipulable, so too were some European images, with articulated limbs and other inventive physical detailing.”(Clendinnen 129) A transculturized triumph would occur in colonial Mexico, partly due to confusion and equally so to resistance, thus giving birth to a new religious culture. This transculturized religion would combine a very significant Christian figure with the image of an indigenous Mexican woman.

Perhaps one of the most significantly transculturized personalities in Mexican culture and religion is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a memorialized icon of the Virgin Mary. Her image and history are celebrated and worshiped throughout various regions in Mexico and over time her story has become a national marker that has created a unique identity, exclusive to the Mexican people. The Virgin appeared to Juan Diego, an indigenous man, in Tepeyac, in 1531.⁴¹ Her physical features were those that resembled indigenous and *mestizo*⁴² women, as opposed to the white European images of the Virgin Mary. Therefore the visual representation of the Virgin’s image allowed the indigenous people to identify with her on a more intimate level, than with that of the “white” woman, which Spaniards introduced to them. “She [spoke] in N’ahuatl, the language of the conquered people. She [was] dark skinned—known affectionately as *la morenita*, “the little dark one”, and she appeared standing on a crescent moon, aureoled by the sun—apocalyptic signs identifying her with the... powerful Aztec symbols.”(Beatty 326) The

⁴¹ Lasso de la Vega, Luis. *The Story of Guadalupe*. Stanford University Press, Stanford California. 1998 The story of Guadalupe states that she appeared to Juan Diego early on a Saturday morning in December on the top of a hill, while the indigenous man was on his way to prayer. The Virgin asked Juan Diego to pass on her wish, which was to have a temple built in her honor on the very hill where she appeared, so that she could listen and aid those who needed her. Juan Diego passed this information on to the bishop of the town, fray Juan de Zumarraga, who asked for the Virgin to appear again before he could make any decisions. Eventually, the Virgin gave Juan Diego flowers in a cloak to give to the bishop and when he did so, the image of the Virgin Mary appeared on the cloak. This served as proof of her existence and led to the church being built in her honor on the top of a hill in Tepeyac. (p30-85)

⁴² Elizondo, Deck, Matovina. *The Treasure of Guadalupe*. Rowman&Littlefield Publishers INC. 2006. In the introduction to their book, the authors define *mestizos* as people of mixed race, placing the Virgin of Guadalupe in that racial category as well, stating that she is the “mother and evangelizer of America...and [that] she calls all people of the hemisphere to form a united America.” (xii)

reconstruction of the initial image of the Virgin Mary serves as an indicator of how the indigenous people applied parts of the Christian faith so that it would suit them, as a people. Instead of being a foreign image to cherish, the Virgin of Guadalupe was a local woman who appeared to an indigenous man, spoke a familiar language, and resembled the native people physically; fragments of religious history with which the indigenous people could relate. Perhaps for the first time, since the Conquest, they found themselves relating to a religious deity, which was not forced upon them and who communicated with them in a peaceful manner (without lashes, whips, and murder, in the name of Christianity).

The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as an event in Mesoamerican history, allowed for a religious binding between the indigenous people, who were being forced onto the path of Christianity without necessarily understanding important components of the religion. Thus, transforming the Spanish image into a familiar one, allowed for a spiritual connection between the religion and the people. The fact that the natives could identify with the Virgin of Guadalupe, created an opportunity for the indigenous people to define themselves as being a specifically mixed or transculturized society, with components of both the old and the new religions. "Catholicism was no longer a foreign religion; it belonged to all Mexicans, it spoke for the defeated and the poor as well as the rich and powerful." (Beatty 326) Though the Spaniards may not have planned on aiding the development of a hybrid religion, their actions did guide the indigenous population towards a transculturized culture. The Conquest, which eliminated important emperors and destroyed paramount religious grounds, and the colonial period, which focused on punishing dissenters who refused to acknowledge and accept the Christian faith, were key events, that reshaped individual *altepetl* into a culturally and religiously transculturized nation.

Conclusion

The questions that were proposed at the beginning of this paper were ones to which I cannot claim to have the concrete answers to. After having researched and analyzed certain topics related to the cultural and religious changes in Mexico during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, I can attest to the fact that change did not come about easily or peacefully in the region of Mexico. The violence exhibited during the two time periods discussed is a representation of two distinct cultures who utilized it in order to both survive and conquer. The Aztecs and the Spaniards, as much as it saddens me to write this, were not able to coexist peacefully, without resorting to violence and death. Pratt's definition of contact zones serves as support for this statement, because force, coercion and violence are key factors in the establishment of dominant-subordinate relationships. Pratt also states that, "while subjugated peoples cannot readily control what the dominant culture visits upon them, they do determine... what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean." (Pratt 7)

When revisiting the religious changes that occurred in Mexico during the colonial period, Pratt's statement proves to be true. The indigenous population adjusted and formatted the Christian religion, as to identify with it on a personal and comprehensive level. Religious figures, like the Virgin of Guadalupe, are results of a transculturized society, in which the purity of a single culture does not dominate over any others. In colonial Mexico, a hybrid culture was formed due to the interactions between a number of distinct cultures. Whether this outcome was desired or not plays no significant role in today's society. The factors that do matter are how the region of Mexico transformed into a transculturized nation, and that it is.

Perhaps the most difficult question we can ask ourselves within a society is, “What am I?” To this open ended inquiry there is no correct response, but rather just various points of view with differing lessons behind each outlook. Attempting to identify a person, a community, or a nation, can lead us to discover that the battle for this identity is one in which the truth can be manipulated and lost. The Mexican Conquest, though violent, paved the way for a shift in identity that resulted in a variety filled and transculturized society. Today, we celebrate this diversity, but in order to arrive at this point intolerance and miscommunication had to pave the way.

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