Effects of Spanish Colonization on Native American Women in South and Mesoamerica

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Discovery and colonization of the Americas brought drastically different worlds colliding together. The gender complementary and gender parallel systems of most of the Americas were a completely foreign concept to the droves of people colonizing the new world from the stanch patriarchal society of Western Europe. The colonization of these gender egalitarian societies, where women and men each had their own role but were both considered to be equally essential, would prove to have drastic negative effects on native societies as a whole. Women would become victims of double jeopardy, which caused them to lose their rights and were demoted in society to a far greater degree than their male counterparts. This was largely due to the patriarchal system which was brought over and implemented originally by the Spanish. However, women did not give in without a fight. They rose up in rebellions, controlled the reproduction of children, and lived in separate all-female locations in order to preserve their heritage. In this paper I will argue that, due to colonization by the Spanish, native women of South and Mesoamerica were demoted in their own societies, stripped of their religious rights, yet still found ways to resist this radical change.

Pre-Colombian society in both South and Mesoamerica was structured by ideologies that were drastically different than those the Spanish would bring with them in their conquest. Andean peoples thought of themselves as descendant from two separate lineages: men from a line of men and women from a line of women. Aztec society viewed offspring as equally from their mothers and fathers because both parents contributed bodily fluids to the creation of the fetus. These gender parallel views contributed greatly to the way in which societal and religious institutions were organized and gave women and men autonomy over their own affairs.

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3 Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest*, 17
In both the Aztec and Inca societies there were separate gendered organizations. Women held both secular and religious positions of authority over other women, and they also had authority over property and possessions they owned or inherited as well as products of their own labor. Many women also spent much of their time with household duties and the production of goods within the home; however, “it cannot be assumed …that these activities were considered in any way trivial or marginal in relation to the male domain.”

Unfortunately, the notions of gender parallel and gender complementary structures in native society soon eroded away with Spanish colonization; even women’s production of goods would soon be dominated by male owned craft shops and mills. The congruent theme prevalent throughout all of the sources used in this paper is that with the Spanish conquest and colonization of South and Mesoamerica, women’s status as a whole in Inca and Aztec societies declined. However, women found ways to resist this change.

The clashing principals of the Spanish and Native American societies brought drastic and destructive effects to the native peoples. The patriarchal system Europeans were accustomed to drove them to make political alliances with the native men of the Inca and Aztec societies only, discounting the authority women possessed. This downgrading would eventually bleed over into a demotion by their own men as well. The most apparent and drastic change in women’s roles in society was that of jural restructuring. Inca women gradually went from representing themselves in court to being required to have a man represent them, even in cases that involved the woman’s own property or possessions. Aztec women also suffered from this new threat of separate but unequal gender spheres when they lost overt legal status and were reduced to jural minors.

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7 Kellogg, Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 88
8 Powers, Women in the Crucible of Conquest, 2
9 Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 151
10 Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 166
11 Kellogg, Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 88
There were societal differences in the ways in which native women were affected by colonization. The women of the native nobility were often given as gifts to the Spanish conquistadors in order to make political alliances, where the peasant women were worked increasingly hard in order to meet the demands for tribute. While both of these acts have atrocious consequences we will focus on the peasantry for the purposes of this paper.

The Inca’s tribute system, which was used to sustain their civilization, required only married couples to submit their goods or services, and married men to work in the mita system a few months out of the year on service projects. The Spanish used this already established system to their advantage. Under the Spanish, all adults were responsible for tribute, even though the idea that only married couples contributed was based on the notion that these couples had both male and female entities to rely on and contribute to their household which mean that they could afford to assist the government. The Spanish tribute system was tied to a different economic system in which goods were not produced for use, but rather for exchange on the European market. Under this new Spanish tribute system, men increasingly preferred to abandon their communities rather than be subject to mita and tribute demands. Silverblatt states, “Since the mita and tribute quotas were not readjusted to account for demographic changes, the increased burdens in effect were met primarily by women (aided by the elderly and children).”

Native women being stripped of their religious practices was probably the most psychologically devastating blow that women received during conquest and colonization by the Spanish. Powers implies that “…the introduction of the colonizer’s religious system into native American societies had the immediate effect of disenfranchising all indigenous women from any

12 Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 165
13 Ibid p 168
14 Ibid
form of priestly status and prohibiting them from officiating at rituals and ceremonies.”

In Incan cosmology, men worshiped the sun and were sons of the sun while women worshiped the moon and were daughters of the moon; both sexes had separate religious organizations and rituals. Similarly, Aztec cosmology was comprised of male and female deities, and both priests and priestesses comprised the religious realm. The parallel worship and complementary sacrifices brought forth to these gods and goddesses insured the continued existence of society, in the eyes of the Inca and Aztec people.

Once the Spanish brought the Reconquista with them to the new world, it was then sacrilegious under Christianity for women to hold previously sacred positions such as healers, confessors, and priestesses within this new religion. The introduction by the Spanish of a single male god and mostly male saints, coupled with women no longer having direct access to the supernatural world must have been psychologically tormenting. In Andean society in particular, the parallel worship of deities maintained balance and without women being able to worship, this meant that one half of their spiritual world was not being sustained, and with it their societies well-being. The spiritual deprivation these women must have felt and the fear they had for the sustainability of their civilizations must have been immense.

Native women in South and Mesoamerica rebelled in various ways against the restrictions placed upon them by the Spanish. One way women resisted was through rebellions such as the Taki Onqoy movement of the 1560s. Women composed more than half of the people involved in this movement whose goal was to restore their society to its pre-Hispanic state. Aztec women participated in colonial rebellions as well. Kellogg states, “Accounts of the Mexico City uprising of

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15 Powers, Women in the Crucible of Conquest, 47
16 Powers, Women in the Crucible of Conquest, 23
17 Ibid
18 Ibid, 48
19 Ibid
20 Ibid, 180
1692 assign Indian women a prominent role in initiating it.”^21 By the 17th century movements such as this were increasingly difficult to take hold because colonial institutions were firmly entrenched into Andean society.\footnote{Kellogg, \textit{Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture}, 119} During this time more and more women decided to flee to the puna or high tablelands where they could live among other women and reject the forces and symbols of the Spanish and return to their native religion.

Women also rebelled in less overt ways such as controlling their reproduction of children. Native women overwhelmingly did not want to bring children into this new world of Spanish control. Powers conveys, “Although impossible to quantify, contraception, abortion and infanticide were widespread.”\footnote{Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 177} Silverblatt also articulates that within the punas, women rebelled through infanticide of their male babies.\footnote{Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 179} “Perhaps revealing their complete despair at seeing themselves abused not only by male representatives of colonial authority, but by male members of their own culture…\footnote{Ibid} women decided not to raise male children who would grow up to potentially abuse them or be abused by the tribute system.

Unfortunately for native women the Spanish patriarchal system dominated life in South and Mesoamerica by the 17th century. However, through texts such as those discussed in this paper their legacy lives on and they are not forgotten by the pages of history. The scholars who have been cited have given these women back their agency and allowed future generations to understand the importance of what these women stood for. They fought in rebellions and began their own societies in order to preserve their civilizations beliefs. These native women were actively resistant to their demotion in society and to the abuses put forth by the Spanish and eventually by their own men.

\footnote{Kellogg, \textit{Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture}, 119} \footnote{Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 177} \footnote{Powers, \textit{Women in the Crucible of Conquest}, 178} \footnote{Silverblatt, “The Universe has Turned Inside Out,” 179} \footnote{Ibid}
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