Christianity and Cultural Hegemony: The Encomienda and the Implementation of Cultural Assimilation.

My purpose for this paper is to argue for more emphasis on the role of religious influence on cultural assimilation as part of land-grants. The encomienda is useful both for its origins in Reconquista Spain and for its exportation to Latin America by Nicholas de Ovando y Cárceres. The encomienda provided a means of organization by which legal and cultural systems, like the Siete Partidas and the Cantigas de Santa María, became significant in consolidating the Castilian kingdom and provided a basis by which the cultural practices of conversos and mudéjars could be carefully observed\(^1\).

In a similar sense, the encomienda of the 16\(^{th}\) century marked a significant moment in the role Indigenous populations would play in their own self-determination. The Inter Caetera of 1493 by Alexander VI stipulated an ideology that rested in the conversion of the Taíno populations\(^2\). The application of this ideology in the early part of the 16\(^{th}\) century is the focus of two sets of cedulas, or Instructions presented by the Crown to Ovando, who was the third Governor of the Indies. Where the first Instructions focused on a benevolent mythology of colonial rule, it is from the second set that we can understand the Crown as viewing Taíno refusal to comply as a form of resistance to Spanish authority. In short, the elements of coercion began to far outweigh the elements of consent, if any could ever have existed within this specific context\(^3\).

---

\(^1\) For a translation of both these documents, see Trans. and Ed. Kathleen Kulp-Hill Cantigas de


The relevance of the question about consent and coercion depends on accepting the possibility of the Spanish Crown as more concerned with the treatment of their Indigenous subjects than popularly believed. The particulars of Spanish colonial rule have been made infamous by the writers of Anglo history, yet the *Leyenda Negra* was a political movement in historiography, all the same. As a brief example, the Crown briefly attempted a number of declarations and commands to regulate the slave trade against Indigenous populations. Indeed, Columbus and his brothers were even sent back to the Crown, in chains, as a result of the accusations made against them.

Nicholas de Ovando was significant in this context for another reason: he was part of the *Alcántara* military order. This order played a role not only in the *Reconquista* of the Southern Spanish territories, but also maintaining order within those regions. Cities like Seville, Jaén and Cordoba were heavily populated by Muslim subjects, which presented a series of challenges to unity for the expanding Castilian kingdom. On a legal level, Muslim territories were allowed to continue their court systems, and on a cultural level, the Jews’ role in financing the conquest had raised questions about the relationship between the kingship and his *privados*. It was within this context that we find the first deeds of several landed titles, one of which was called the *encomienda*.

---

5 Many of these documents can be found in a collection of documents organized by Richard Konetzke, Ed. *Colección de Documentos para la Historia de la Formacion Social de Hispano-America, Vol. I* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1953). Additionally a document by Francisco de Bobadilla has been found as recently as 2005, documenting the abuses of Columbus.
Robert Chamberlin’s essay in 1939 predicted the focus of *encomienda* study for much of the 20th century. Economic historians would ask questions about role of the *encomienda* in fiscal policy from a number of perspectives. It was a perplexing paradox that the Crown sought to both to secure the Indigenous populations as Christian subjects and attempt to exploit their labor power. If economic concerns were vital, why not continue with slavery, a practice that had been compatible with the Christian faith, for a very long time?

When colonialism became more organized, studies began to examine its impact on a cultural level. Nancy Farriss’ work on the Maya is a stellar example of this tradition. James Lockhart, and his students have committed to a similar discussion from the realm of linguistics rather than ethnography. Walter Mignolo has contributed to the debates by asking the questions about colonial knowledge systems, and what it would

---

Nieto Soría “Los judíos de Toledo en sus relaciones financieras con la monarquía y la Iglesia (1252-1312),” *Sefarad* 41 (1981), pp. 301-19 for examples of this.

8 Robert S. Chamberlin “Castilian Backgrounds of the Repartimiento-Encomienda”, *Contributions to American Anthropology and History* 5:25 (1939): 23-70. He includes a number of deeds found in a variety of archives of *encomienda* and *mandacion* land grants made to military orders, which included the Alcantara.

9 In particular, “The Conquistadores served at their own costs, bearing their own expenses. Certain of them had expended their entire fortunes in the conquest and colonization. They consequently regarded adequate compensation as their just due, resting their claims in already existing Castilian practice and custom.” Ibid, 27.


even mean to understand knowledge objectively, when one transitions from the Indigenous to European subjects and standards\textsuperscript{14}.

Most of these studies, however, are focused on periods after Cortés in 1517. They look to the moments after the large military conquests, when the colonial order, by most accounts, had already been set. Prior to Ovando, colonial settlement was still in its infancy, and his fleet included names such as Francisco de Pizarro, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Hernán Cortés, although the latter failed to show up. Further, the presence of friars like Ramón Pané and Antonio de Montesinos present a more complex picture than simply one of fated destruction and larger debates in Valladolid and Salamanca\textsuperscript{15}.

Outside of the abuses, enslavement and exploitation that had been noted to the Crown, nothing was set in stone.

Let me start by citing the most relevant part of the Inter Caetera of 1493:

“Wherefore, as becomes Catholic kings and princes after earnest consideration of all matters, especially of the rise and spread of the Christian faith, as was the fashion of your ancestors, kings of renowned memory, you have purposed with the favor of divine clemency to bring under your sway the said mainlands and islands with their residence and inhabitants to bring them to the Catholic faith.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Walter D. Mignolo, \textit{The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2003).
\textsuperscript{16} Inter Caetera.
One of the main functions of an ideology is to provide a means of organization. These justifications provided an ideological backbone by which political and cultural spaces could be organized. On his second trip, Columbus brought the friar Ramón Pané with him to attempt a study of the Taíno populations on the island in 1497. His brief proto-ethnology focused on the mythologies of the people and how they might be used to move forward the process of conversion. Of particular importance to Pané’s report is the discovery of a single deity, much akin to the Christian God: “…a one and true God, who was immortal and invisible for none could see him and who had no beginning.”17

The Inter Caetera also holds a historical claim. Alexander’s passing reference to the ancestors, kings of renowned memory, is almost certainly a nod to the role Fernando III played in expanding the Castilian kingdom in the 13th century. His military conquests were followed by the particular interests of Alfonso X in consolidating his territories. The Partidas’ specific function was to create a unified body of law that would simplify the court systems, and create an even sense of justice throughout the country.18 The Cantigas de Santa María attempted to give Alfonso a sense of cultural legitimacy, by portraying him as her troubadour, singing songs of her pious miracles, that touch even the hearts of Jews and Moors, and move them towards conversion. This was particularly important since the very title of Alfonso the Wise implied a sense of heresy, as though searching for knowledge of the world was to liken oneself as God.

17 Pané, Account, page 4.
18 For specifics, see Parsons, Siete Partidas Vol. 2, pages ix-xxi.
In this context, the first *encomiendas* were established as part of the organizational process\(^\text{19}\). In Muríca, 1272, for example, *encomiendas* were established, and given to military orders in the process of rewarding individuals for the success of the campaign and establishing order within the new states. As Joseph O’Callaghan has noted, many Islamic cities had far more Muslim subjects than Christians\(^\text{20}\). While *encomenderos* were typically defined by their economic role as tax collectors and tributaries for the king, the very concept of taxation was not necessarily secular. For example, a number of taxes focused primarily on the religious identities of their subjects. Several taxes, like the *decima* and the *tercia* were meant for the Church and became a subject of fierce debate over whether they ought to be sent to the Pope, or given to the Spanish king who had traditionally retained control over his own bishops\(^\text{21}\).

The distinction between purported secular status and religious identity was further blurred by the introduction of the *adelantado* office, used to create a regulatory aspect to the Castilian countries, and recently formed *encomiendas*. The *Siete Partidas* outlined the *adelantado* as a position of judicial power, often held by someone for the Crown\(^\text{22}\). The *adelantado* had particular interest in hearing disputes between Christians and non-Christian parties. This was enumerated in duties of the *adelantado* in the *Partidas*:

---


\(^{20}\) Joseph O’Callaghan, *Medieval Spain*, 1975, page 358: “In the meantime, the Christian rulers were reminded of the constant domestic peril caused by the presence of vast numbers of Muslims within their dominions”.


\(^{22}\) Scott, Vol 3, *Siete Partidas*, Partida 3, Titulo 4 covers most of this.
“Adelantados and other magistrates are appointed over countries and people to maintain them in peace and justice by honoring and protecting the good and by punishing and correcting the wicked.” However, the question of Alfonso’s kingship as Christian or not was one that haunted him through his career, and it speaks to the powerfully political context of the faith that the charges against Alfonso, prior to the rebellion of his son Sancho IV, were made on the grounds of him as manipulated by his Jewish counselors, and his explorations of knowledge as barely Christian.

The relationship between politics and religion becomes more difficult to parse with a brief consideration of 7.24 and 7.25, “Concerning the Jews” and “Concerning the Moors.” Each section outlines a variety of laws and procedures that must be observed in the particular case of these subjects. These laws may be broken down into ones that made life as a Jew or Muslim harder, or ones that rewarded assimilation. 7.24.3, for example is titled “No Jews Can Hold Any Office or Employment by Which He May Be Able to Oppress Christians,” and 7.24.6 specifically states that, in regard to conversos, “all persons in our dominion shall honor them; and that no one shall dare to reproach them or their descendants, by way of insult; with having been Jews.”

Within the context of 16th century Hispaniola, little seemed different. The Taíno people engaged with a belief system that was not Christianity, and they existed in huge numbers. In order to gain access to the economic resources that Columbus had so eagerly promised, Isabel and Ferdinand had to demonstrate their commitment to Christianity.

---

23 Scott, Partida 3, Titulo 4, Ley 16, page 571. Partida 2, Titulo 9, Ley 22 also explores the specific frame work of Christianity for political decisions.
24 Parsons, Siete Partidas, Vol. 7, Title 24 and Title 25. For more on the Muslims, see Joseph O’Callaghan, Alfonso X and the Cantigas de Santa Maria: A Poetic Biography (Leiden: Brill, 1998), Chapter 5: “The Threat of Islam”.
Such a commitment was attempted, first, as a benevolent partnership between the two people. Isabel goes so far in a set of instructions dated to 1501 to tell Ovando that the Christian faith ought to be done through a process of consent\(^26\). To this end, Ovando is explicitly instructed to not use force in the conversion process. The justification for conversion is given by “it is the best thing that we can wish for them.”\(^27\) Even where taxes and labor were concerned the Crown stressed the importance of consent\(^28\). Ovando was to discuss the terms and conditions for such expectations with the leaders of varying groups known as the *caciques*\(^29\).

The central assumption within this document is a common one amongst colonial powers. Their beliefs in the objective truth of their civilizations tend to circumvent the conception of colonized individuals as autonomous\(^30\). The later writings of several friars and theologians would struggle with these newfound populations and where they fit in the material and spiritual world. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace hints of the logic of progression as early as Columbus’ first letters\(^31\): While cannibals were a special case, Pané’s own exposition on Taíno belief systems indicated a sense of primitive identity

\(^{26}\) Konetzke, *Colección*, document 6: “…los informen y amonesten para ello con mucho amor, de manera que lo más presto que se pueda se conviertan; y para ello daréis todo el favor y ayuda que menester sea…”, and prohibiting force, page 5: “…diréis de nuestra parte a los caciques y a los otros principales que nos queremos que los indios sean bien tratados como nuestros buenos súbditos y vasallos, y que ninguno sea osado de les hacer mal ni daño…”.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, page 5.

\(^{28}\) Ibid, page 5.

\(^{29}\) “…habalaréis de nuestra parte con los caciques y con las otras personas principales de los indios que viéredes son menester, y de su voluntad concordaréis con ellos los que nos hayan de pagar cada uno, cada año de tributos y derechos de manera que ellos conozcan que no se les hace injusticia” Ibid, pages 5-6.


within their religious ordering. The tolerance and voluntary nature of the first set of Instructions were predicated on this understanding.

In this context, we receive the response of the Taíno. They would run away from Spanish settlements. When given a choice between planting crops for the Spanish, and not planting at all, they chose the latter. These are the sort of resistance strategies often used by colonized groups, and have been noted by scholars like Restall, Lockhart and Farriss. While it is often difficult to assert the significance of actions without written documentation from the peoples performing the actions, we do have evidence that such actions were read as resistance by the Crown. This is found in the second set of Instructions given by Isabel. Where the first Instructions stressed consent, these ones stressed coercion. Gone were the voluntary aspects of labor. Ovando had been granted permission to implement *encomienda* land grants. The nature of the *encomienda* system allowed him free control over the autonomy of Indigenous populations, and the amount of labor that they were required to perform for the Spanish colonists.

A further addition of these *encomienda* land grants was the inclusion of a chapel and priest for each grant. While it may be easy to dismiss this entirely as lip service to the papal bulls, it is also important to note the role that religious influence would play on the ground. Further influence was yielded to Taíno who converted, and privileges established in order that they might have incentive to join with Christian Spain. These mirrored many of the benefits for Jews and Muslims within the *Reconquista*. Further, while having the Christian faith did not guarantee one’s status as citizen and permanent resident in Spain,

---

32 Arrom, *Account*, page 12 for Pané’s take on the Taíno origin myths.
it was a requirement. While residencia in Latin America did not imply residencia in Spain, and vice versa, it was much easier to buy into either side of this process if one became Christian. So, on one side, we might look towards the particular bans on Jews and Muslims in the Spanish colonies, and on the other, we might point towards the process of mass baptism of the Taíno, of the Caribs, and the many other Indigenous populations with which the Spaniards came into contact.

It is in this vein that we see a form of cultural hegemony instigated. The role of the political, legal and cultural institutions were used to ground Christianity as a normative ideology. Indeed, Antonio Gramsci’s own work on the idea of cultural hegemony explicitly used the example of the religious intellectual classes. Indeed, in the later parts of the 16th century theologians like José de Acosta desired to refute positions based on perceptions of the Indigenous populations as subhuman. This was done to show that the salvation of souls was something of importance. A popular tactic employed by Las Casas himself was to compare Indigenous populations to the Greco-Romans, in order to show that these individuals were both human and civil. The construction of colonial rule is, at its roots, similar to what Hardt and Negri refer to as the problematic of empire: “That there is world order.” In regards to the 16th century, there was a larger desire to catalog and understand the groups of people encountered and

---

situate them in the European narrative. An association with the intellectual tradition of doctrinal soteriology was thus necessary both in order to recognize the history of Indigenous groups, and ensure their commitment to becoming civilized.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


José Manel Nieto Soria “Los judíos de Toledo en sus relaciones financieras con la monarquía y la Iglesia (1252-1312),” *Sefarad* 41 1981.


