

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

Conquest, Conversion, and Concubines

History 395: Sex and Gender in Early America

Professor: Dr. Maren Wood

Elizabeth Bullock

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Conquest, Conversion, and Concubines

When Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés made peace with the Tabascan people they “brought a present of gold, consisting of four diadems, some ornaments in the form of lizards, two shaped like little dogs and five little ducks, also some earrings...” as well as twenty indigenous women, including a “most excellent person who when she became a Christian took the name of Doña Marina.”¹ Doña Marina was described as “the prettiest, the most active and lively of the number” and as having an appearance that attested to her status as “a truly great princess, the daughter of *Caciques*.” Doña Marina was originally given to Puertocarrero, but upon his return to Spain, she “lived with Cortés, to whom she bore a son named Don Martin Cortés.”² She later went on to marry Juan Jaramillo.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a soldier under the leadership of Hernán Cortés, described Doña Marina in a positive light in every mention of her in his memoirs of the conquest of New Spain, but especially when she converted to Christianity. Diaz related the story of when Marina was reunited with her mother and brother. Upon seeing Marina, they felt guilty and anxious, but she “comforted them” and “freely forgave the past.” Bernal Diaz saw this incident as proof that “God...turned her away from the errors of heathenism and converted her to Christianity.” He even compared Doña Marina’s story to that of Joseph and his brothers in the Bible, in which Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery because it ultimately led him to a place of power.³

¹ Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, Trans. J.M. Cohen, (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 80.

² Diaz, 82.

³ Diaz, 86.

Doña Marina's life demonstrates two major themes present in the Spanish conquest of Mexico: the use of conversion to Christianity in order to promote assimilation and loyalty and the practice of interracial relationships. Both of these tactics were used to achieve the goals of conquest. Spanish conquerors sought to claim territory, convert and assimilate natives, and find wealth. These goals were best stated by Hernán Cortés in his letters to the Spanish Crown: he planned "to see and to explore those lands in Your Excellency's Royal name" and "to found there towns of Christians to instruct them in the mode of life they were to follow...for the salvation of their souls."⁴ The writings of Cortés and Bernal Diaz also explicitly discuss their desire to obtain wealth. Many pages in Diaz's account of the aftermath of the takeover of the Aztec capital were devoted to the gathering and distributing of the wealth pillaged from Tenochtitlán and of suspicions against Cortés for hiding it from the soldiers.⁵

Furthermore, Bernal Diaz's memoir described many incidents when indigenous women were given to Cortés and his men and immediately baptized as Christians. Through the writings of Cortés and Diaz, it becomes evident that the conversion of indigenous women to Catholicism, and Spanish men's relationships with them, were not secondary aspects of colonization. Rather, this paper argues that it was through their relationships with indigenous women that Spanish men achieved their goals of conquest. Through the account of Bernal Diaz del Castillo and the letters sent to Spain by Hernán Cortés, I will examine how Spanish men used religious conversion and relationships formed with

⁴ Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, trans. and ed. Anthony Pagden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 419.

⁵ Diaz, 409-411.

indigenous women to conquer the indigenous people. This paper will also explore the effects of conquest on indigenous women.

The physical Spanish conquest of Mexico, led by Hernán Cortés, spanned from about 1519 to 1521 at which time the Aztec capital fell under Spanish control.⁶ From that time, of course, the control of the Spanish spread across the region and more priests and monks came to the colonies to spread the Catholic faith. However, this paper concentrates on the period between 1519 and 1522 because both Diaz and Cortés wrote primarily of the events that occurred within this time period. Cortés' letters to the Crown and Diaz's detailed account of his time under Cortés provide us with an opportunity to explore the processes by which native women were converted to Christianity, and how these women were forced into interracial relationships during the initial phase of conquest in Mexico.

The first-person experiences of indigenous women are unknown due to the lack of sources. These accounts, written by Spanish men, must be considered from the perspective from which they were written. These sources offer a glimpse but do not tell us much about the views of indigenous women from their own point of view. The primary sources this paper draws from are limited in that they were written by Spanish men, both of who participated directly in the conquest of Mexico. Diaz and Cortés would have each viewed indigenous women through the ideas of the Spanish patriarchal society, the Catholic religion, and the goals of the conquest.

The purpose of these men's writings must also be taken into consideration. Bernal Diaz del Castillo's text was written as a memoir. He stated a desire to write a "true" account of the conquest and to correct the erroneous accounts of earlier writers, namely

⁶ Buddy Levy, *Conquistador: Hernán Cortés, King Montezuma, and the Last Stand of the Aztecs*, (New York: Bantam, 2008), 1, 312.

Francisco Lopez de Gomara. This statement could mean that Gomara had written a false account and Diaz wished to correct it or it could mean that Gomara had depicted the conquerors, which would include Diaz, in a negative light that Diaz wished to contest. Either way, Diaz wrote his first-hand account at the age of 76, a considerable number of years later.⁷ This fact by itself would render all of his exact quotes from indigenous leaders and Cortés, as well as other precise details, unreliable.

Hernán Cortés' writings should also be considered as limited sources of the conquest, especially in regards to women. His writings were letters to the Spanish Crown. They were written in an effort to prove to the King of Spain that Cortés was carrying out his wishes in the conquest of Mexico. Also, since there was controversy over Cortés' right to lead the conquest, he was attempting to give himself more legitimacy as a leader.⁸ His account of events would most likely be embellished to provide details that portrayed his actions in the best light while also minimizing the accomplishments of other captains preceding him. Also, Cortés rarely mentions indigenous women, including Doña Marina, who is mentioned twice in his letters, and only once by name.⁹

Even though the sources are limited, they are two of the few sources that give insight into religious conversion practices and the women affected by the conquest. Diaz's memoir, especially, recounted the conversions of women as well as Doña Marina's life story in more detail than most other sources. Cortés's letters are less detailed in regard to women, but do include many references to religious conversion.

⁷ J.M. Cohen, trans., *The Conquest of New Spain*, (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 7.

⁸ Anthony Pagden, trans., *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xl.

⁹ Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, 376.

The perspective of indigenous women is difficult to find in the available sources because men are the authors of the texts of the time due to restraints on education and other limitations. In addition to the lack of texts by women in general, there is also a bias in the available resources in that most are written by European men and very few by indigenous men. In this way, indigenous women are doubly mysterious to us.

The story of the conquest has been romanticized and mythologized, with much focus placed on the conquerors. Doña Marina, in particular, has become a prominent historical figure and parts of her story have become myth. She is well known as the mistress of Cortés, but her value to Cortés, initially at least, was in the role of translator. Having been given by her family to the Tabascans she could speak both Maya and Nahuatl, two of the main indigenous languages. Her knowledge of Maya proved to be useful, as one member of the conquering party, Juan de Aguilar, could also speak Maya because he had been a captive of the Maya for many years. As such he could then translate the Maya into Spanish.¹⁰

However, outside of her role as translator, Doña Marina's life was not all that different from the lives of many other indigenous women who became mistresses to Spanish men. She was given as a peace offering by an indigenous tribe to the Spanish, baptized and renamed as a Christian, and then given to one Spaniard after another. Her opinion or feelings about her conversion or her relationships with the Spanish men to whom she was given were not recorded by Diaz; however, it can be seen that she had little choice in the matter of her conversion or her participation in these interracial relationships.

¹⁰ Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, 86-87.

Some historians have argued that rape and sexual conquest were used as tools by conquerors in order to advance their own agenda. Conquerors saw indigenous women as sexually promiscuous and the ability to coerce sex as proof of a man's sexual prowess.¹¹ Others have demonstrated that religious conversion affected the gender roles of indigenous women by imposing new gender roles influenced by the new religion.¹² Still others have claimed that indigenous women acted as cultural mediators between indigenous groups and conquerors or explorers due to their proximity with the conquering men and their roles as mothers to children of the conquerors.¹³ I will synthesize these different aspects of women's roles in the conquest in order to get a more complicated picture of how both religious conversions and interracial relationships with Spaniards affected indigenous women and what role women were placed in by the conquest.

Religious Conversion

Bernal Diaz and Hernán Cortés each asserted that God supported the conquest of Mexico and granted the soldiers help and success in battle. In describing one battle, Diaz wrote, "I say that all our deeds and victories were the work of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and that in this battle there were so many Indians to every one of us that the dust they made would have blinded us, had not God of His unfailing mercy come to our aid".¹⁴ Cortés, too, wrote of God's help in battle, claiming that Spanish men "were fighting for our Faith and in the service of Your Sacred Majesty...God gave us such a victory that we killed many of

¹¹ Stephanie Wood, "Sexual Violation in the Conquest of the Americas," in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Merrill D. Smith, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 9-54.

¹² Karen Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 48-52.

¹³ Clara Sue Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators", *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992): 97.

¹⁴ Diaz, 77.

them without ourselves receiving any hurt.”¹⁵ Cortés also reported to the Crown that he encouraged his soldiers by telling them that “as Christians we were obliged to wage war against the enemies of our Faith” and “that God was on our side, and to Him nothing is impossible.”¹⁶ The prevalence of religious language used in both accounts demonstrates the importance of religious conversion in the cultural mindset of the Spaniards.

That religious conversion of the native people was the official goal of conquest is clearly indicated in the writings of both Cortés and Diaz. In his letters to the Crown, Cortés himself lists his reasons for embarking on the conquest. He wrote that he had been commanded “to found there towns of Christians to instruct them in the mode of life they were to follow for...the salvation of their souls. This was the reason for my coming...”¹⁷ Diaz did not explicitly write of the goal to convert indigenous people, but he agreed with Cortés’ attempts to do so and as a Christian himself he was “delighted to find the image of Our Lady and the cross well-tended, and incense burning in front of them” after returning to find the cross and image of the Virgin Mary still with the natives the expedition had left them with.¹⁸

Hernán Cortés wrote often to the Spanish Crown about his efforts to convert the native people. His goal was to turn them away from human sacrifice and the worship of idols and teach them of Christianity. Many times this conversion took the form of destruction and was done by force. Once such instance can be found in his second letter:

¹⁵ Cortés, 60.

¹⁶ Cortés, 63.

¹⁷ Cortés, 418-419.

¹⁸ Diaz, 63.

The most important of these idols, and the ones in whom they have most faith, I had taken from their places and thrown down the steps; and I had those chapels where they were cleaned, for they were full of the blood of sacrifices; and I had images of Our Lady and of other saints put there, which caused Mutezuma [sic] and the other natives some sorrow.¹⁹

This incident highlights the physical and emotional disruption that the conquerors often caused in their efforts to convert the indigenous people. They often did so without the permission of the indigenous people. This disruption was more detrimental to women due to the fact that not only did religious conversion affect their spiritual lives, but it had an effect on all aspects of society, including gender roles.

In the Aztec culture, both men and women could participate directly in religious organizations and rituals. Women could be priestesses in the temple, alongside male priests. Women could also be members in religious organizations devoted to female deities, while men could do the same for a male deity.²⁰ Men and women were therefore seen as spiritual equals, both genders able to represent themselves to the gods. Religious practices were not the only aspect of life that followed these gender parallels. The idea of separate yet equal positions in society for both genders applied to religion, economics, politics, and other social customs. For example, descent was also viewed through the idea of gender parallelism. Since children were products of both their mother and their father, they could be considered as belonging to both.²¹ This gender parallelism seems to be linked to the way the gods were understood and depicted. Both women and men were represented by the

¹⁹ Cortés, 106.

²⁰ Powers, 23.

²¹ Powers, 17.

gods, who were often shown as married couples and thus embodied masculine and feminine characteristics.²²

The Spanish conquerors also arrived in Mexico with preconceived notions of gender roles engrained in religion. Not only did the Catholic faith proclaim only one male God, but it also put women into an inferior, dependent role due to the fact that women could not hold positions of authority in the church. Men were responsible for the spiritual lives of their wives, daughters, and all other women in their households and were allowed to physically punish their female relatives as well.²³ Women also needed male priests to intervene between them and the saints and God. Thus this patriarchal belief system extended to all parts of life.²⁴ Women were treated as minors in regard to the law and could not file their own lawsuits or claims in court.²⁵

The application of the idea of patriarchy to the conversion of the indigenous people can be seen through the conversion of women. When women were given to the Spaniards, permission was sometimes asked of the fathers or male leaders to baptize the women, but permission was not sought from the women themselves. When Montezuma offered Cortés his daughter, Cortés responded that he “desired her to become a Christian, as other ladies, the daughters of chieftains, had done.” Diaz stated that “[t]o this the prince consented.” This example shows how the Spaniards applied their religious patriarchy to the indigenous people, assuming it was the men’s decision whether or not women could be baptized.

²² Powers, 24.

²³ Powers, 40-41.

²⁴ Powers, 47.

²⁵ Powers, 41.

From these contrasts between the two sets of beliefs, it can be seen why conversion was so destructive to women in particular. It not only altered what they were supposed to believe spiritually, but also their roles in society. When converting to Christianity, they were giving up their own spiritual autonomy and ability to participate in ritual.

The way in which Cortés approached the conversion of the native people varied little, but was not always quite as physically destructive as discussed above. Cortes's letters are full of religious references and reports of his attempts to convert the indigenous peoples. In one such instance, he wrote to the crown:

Be it known to Your Majesties that the captain urged the chieftains of that island to renounce their heathen religion; and when they asked him to give them instead a precept by which they might henceforth live, he instructed them as best he could in the Catholic Faith. He left them a wooden cross fixed on top of a high building and an image of Our Lady the Virgin Mary, and told them most fully all they were to do to be good Christians; and they showed him that they had received everything with great goodwill, and thus we left them very happy and contented.²⁶

This excerpt is one of many such recounts to the Crown of Cortés's attempts to convert the indigenous people. All of his efforts followed a general order. He spoke to the leaders, asking them to stop worshipping idols and performing human sacrifice, then he would tell them about Christianity and leave them with a cross, an image of the Virgin Mary, and instructions to maintain those symbols. This instruction could hardly have been sufficient to fully explain Christianity; however it seemed enough to Cortés to consider them converted.

The large quantity of these attempts at conversion indicates that it was a priority for the conquerors. The purpose of conversion, however, was not just to save souls, but also to

²⁶ Cortés, 18.

introduce the power of the Spanish Crown. Cortés wrote to the Crown that when giving the indigenous people “knowledge of our Holy Catholic Faith” directions on how to “become Your Majesties’ vassals and serve and obey You” were also given, highlighting the fact that conversion was a tool for assimilation and conquest.²⁷

Bernal Diaz also wrote of Cortés’s attempts to convert the indigenous people. Diaz’s story includes numerous instances where women were given to the conquerors, baptized and renamed with Christian names. They were then given to a Spanish man occasionally as a wife but more commonly as a mistress or concubine. Doña Marina’s story is a prime example. She was originally given to Puertocarrero in what must be assumed to be the position of mistress. She then lived with Cortés as a mistress and had a child with him. Later in the conquest, Marina married Juan Jaramillo.²⁸ Other, lesser-known women were also subjected to this practice of conversion and assignment to a Spaniard. When Doña Marina was converted, nineteen other women were also baptized. Diaz stated that the women were told “not to believe in the idols they had worshipped, since they were evil things and not gods, and to offer them no more sacrifices... and [they] must worship our Lord Jesus Christ, and immediately afterwards they were baptized.” Diaz also explicitly states that these were “the first women in New Spain to become Christians.”²⁹

On another occasion, Diaz wrote that when the *Caciques* decided to “give us the most beautiful of their daughters and nieces who were ready for marriage”, Cortés agreed. According to Diaz, “Xicotenga the Elder said: ‘Malinche, to prove still more clearly how much we love you and wish to please you in all things, we want to give you our daughters

²⁷ Cortés, 11.

²⁸ Diaz, 82, 86.

²⁹ Diaz, 82.

for wives to bear you children.” Cortés accepted the offer and said to the friar, “Father, I think this would be a good time to try to induce these chiefs to give up their idols and stop their sacrifices, for they will do anything we tell them...” However, the friar counsels Cortés to wait until the leaders bring their daughters forward so that Cortés can tell them that he “will not accept the maidens until they give up sacrifices.”³⁰ This passage shows not only how women were baptized, but also how women were used by the Spaniards as tools to advance the goal of conversion.

Interracial Relationships

The Spanish conquerors often entered into relationships of different lengths of duration with the indigenous women they came across. Some of these resulted in official, legal marriages, while most were shorter, less permanent relationships. There were many benefits for the Spanish men ranging from sexual gratification and practical needs for survival to diplomacy between the Spaniards and the indigenous leaders. Interracial relationships between Spaniards were not considered unusual or unwanted by the Spanish Crown or the Catholic Church. On the contrary, in 1501, the Crown officially approved intermarriage. Marriage between Spaniards and indigenous people was promoted in order to avoid concubinage and to better assimilate the natives.³¹ It was also encouraged between Spanish men and indigenous daughters of *caciques* so that control of land and people would pass to the Spanish.³² Concubinage, or sex out of wedlock, of any kind was expressly

³⁰ Diaz, 175-176.

³¹ Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 26.

³² Mörner, 37.

prohibited by the Church, and by extension, the Crown; however, it was the most prevalent form of interracial relationship in the early stages of conquest.³³

Women were most often seen as spoils of war or peace offerings. Diaz equated women to spoils when he described what the soldiers would do after defeating a group of indigenous warriors. He wrote that “[w]hat chiefly concerned them was to look for a pretty woman or find some spoil” and that they returned “with much spoil, especially of good-looking Indian women.”³⁴ This perception of women as something the soldiers deserved to take contributes to the argument that the conquerors used sexual conquest as a means of subjugating the indigenous people.

Women were not only seen as spoils of war, but also as tokens of peace. However, it was not solely Spanish men who used women in order to achieve these goals. Returning to the earlier example of Xicotenga’s offer to Cortés, it can be seen that the indigenous men also used women in order to facilitate peace. Xicotenga told Cortés, “we want to give you our daughters for wives to bear you children. For you are so good and brave that we wish to be your brothers.”³⁵ The indigenous leaders used women to promote peace and the Spanish accepted those women in the interest of maintaining peace and gaining loyalty from the natives. As before mentioned Cortés also used this opportunity to promote religious conversion. In both cases the ultimate goal of the Spanish was to bring about assimilation and gain allies.

³³ Mörner, 26.

³⁴ Diaz, 330-331.

³⁵ Diaz, 175.

Montezuma also offered one of his daughters to Cortés in an expression of peace and love. Diaz recorded the offer in his memoir:

One day Montezuma said to Cortés: 'See, Malinche, how much I love you. I should like to give you one of my daughters, a very beautiful girl, to marry and have as your legal wife.' Cortés doffed his helmet in gratitude, and said that this was a great favour Montezuma was conferring on him, but he was already married, and that among us it was not permissible to have more than one wife. He would however treat her with the honour to which the daughter of so great a prince was entitled, but first of all he desired her to become a Christian, as other ladies, the daughters of chieftains, had done.³⁶

Again, this incident shows that indigenous leaders saw the benefit in giving their daughters to the Spanish. The Spaniards honored the gift as a sign of peace and love. This incident also brings to attention the fact that many of the Spanish conquerors were already legally married to Spanish women. In those cases they would keep their mistress until their Spanish wife came to the colonies established after the conquest.

Religion and interracial relationships both had a profound effect on women's roles and lives. Both were used as methods of assimilation and control over the indigenous peoples. Women were seen as peace intermediaries and spoils of war. Conversion of the women could lead to conversion of an entire indigenous group. Conversion could also lead to loyalty to Spain and alliances for the conquerors. Interracial relationships assimilated women into Spanish patriarchal culture and served as a vehicle by which Spanish men could inherit native lands and control.

Women's Perspective

One example from Bernal Diaz's memoirs offers a small amount of insight into indigenous women's choices, albeit still from a Spanish male source. He wrote that after the

³⁶ Diaz, 276.

fall of Tenochtitlán many male indigenous leaders complained to Cortés that their wives and daughters had been “carried off” and “that they should be sent back.” Bernal claimed that Cortés made an effort to retrieve them, but many of them “did not wish to go with their fathers or mothers or husbands, but preferred to remain with the soldiers with whom they were living.” Their reasons ranged from an expressed desire to remain Christian to being pregnant.³⁷ If true, was there a measure of choice or preference to stay with Spanish men?

From Diaz’s account, it seemed that women did have a choice or a motivation for being with Spanish men. Women who claimed they wished to remain Christian could have been demonstrating a choice to convert or could be offering that as an excuse just to remain with a Spanish man. Either way, these particular women were making a choice to accept the new religion. Some women may have truly wanted to convert, seeing an appealing quality in Catholicism. Others, most likely, saw that giving into conversion could offer advantages in relationships with Spanish men and more protection for their children. Also, women who were pregnant probably sought the support of the father for their child as well as themselves. But the question remains: to what extent did these women have real autonomy?

From looking at women’s lived experiences, the gender roles of indigenous communities, and the social statuses of the women involved with Spanish men, a more complete theory can be formed about what women’s active roles were in conversion to Christianity and participation in relationships with Spanish men.

Indigenous women left no primary documents about their experiences during the Spanish conquest; however some details of their lives are known. Women’s lived

³⁷ Diaz, 408-409.

experiences during the Spanish conquest of Mexico can provide us with some idea of what opinions women had of the Spanish. These women who became involved with Spaniards had to “straddle” the two cultures.³⁸ This cultural intersection became more difficult when mestizo children were born into relationships between indigenous women and Spanish men. Indigenous women also often faced many hardships in their relationships with Spanish men. In addition to submitting to the patriarchal ideology of Catholicism, these women faced forced relationships with Spanish men, separation from their mestizo children, and the likely abandonment by their partner when his Spanish wife or a more suitable Spanish woman arrived.

Indigenous women, especially noblewomen, often married or cohabitated with the same Spanish men who killed their family members.³⁹ Doña Isabel, daughter of Montezuma, spent time with Cortés and had a child with him before going on to marry another Spanish man even though Cortés and the Spanish conquerors were responsible for the conditions in which her father died.⁴⁰ Some of these women may have chosen to marry these men because of a duty to their family or people, but others were forced into these relationships by the same men who had destroyed their society.

When these interracial relationships produced children, they were often taken away from their mothers because Spanish men did not feel that indigenous women were capable of raising their own children due to the double inferiority stemming from both their race and their gender. These children were either placed with Spanish relatives in the Americas

³⁸ Powers, 76.

³⁹ Powers, 75.

⁴⁰ Powers, 76.

or were sent to receive education in Spain.⁴¹ Doña Marina's son with Cortés, Don Martin, was placed in the care of a male cousin of Cortés and later taken to Spain by Cortés, where he requested, successfully, for Martin to be legitimized in the eyes of the Spanish legal system.⁴² This practice was based on the Spanish practice of removing children from the care of "wayward" mothers, women considered to be sexually promiscuous.⁴³

Indigenous mistresses to Spanish men could also face abandonment when their legal Spanish wives arrived or a more suitable Spanish woman became available for marriage.⁴⁴ Some indigenous women were also abandoned in favor of a more noble, rich, or powerful native woman. Spanish men used marriages to noble indigenous women in order to gain access to the wealth and land included in the woman's dowry or owned outright by her. In indigenous society, women could own property, while Spanish society only allowed men to own property. In the conquest, the patriarchal structure was pushed onto the indigenous people, thus the Spaniards could gain property and wealth through marriages and, sometimes even through cohabitation only.⁴⁵

Why did women choose to be with Spanish men despite the experiences discussed above? While the lived experiences of indigenous women can help us to understand what happened to these women and what conditions they lived under, the texts under analysis offer little understanding into what the women involved with the Spanish conquerors were thinking and feeling. In order to better understand the choices of the indigenous women

⁴¹ Powers, 77-78.

⁴² Frances E. Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (eBook), (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4.

⁴³ Powers, 78.

⁴⁴ Mörner, 26.

⁴⁵ Powers, 73.

involved with Spanish men it is necessary to understand how these women were perceived in their own indigenous communities.

As before mentioned, indigenous societies had a system in which both genders were represented by the gods and allowed to participate in rituals.⁴⁶ These parallel roles in religion also extended to society as a whole. The roles of men and women were considered parallel and complementary to each other. For example, labor of both men and women in the Aztec society was kept separate, but the work of each was regarded as valuable. Women's work in the home, as well as childbirth, was even considered sacred. This system of gender parallelism meant that women's roles were regarded as valuable and necessary alongside men's roles. Neither was valued over the other because both were necessary for the wellbeing of the community. However, these roles were prescribed by gender from birth.⁴⁷ Women's decision-making abilities and legal rights were also equal to those of men.⁴⁸ Thus, there were expectations placed on both genders, but women were not in a completely subjugated position.

It is also important to understand the social positions of the women who were given to the Spaniards. Doña Marina, for example, was a slave in the Tabascan community, having been sold away by her own family in order to make way for a new son to receive the family's inheritance and power as caciques.⁴⁹ Despite her biological position as the daughter of a chieftain, she was not considered such by the leaders who gave her to Cortés. She, and the other nineteen captive women given at the same time, had no choice in their placement

⁴⁶ Powers, 23-24.

⁴⁷ Powers, 25.

⁴⁸ Powers, 44.

⁴⁹ Diaz, 85.

with the Spaniards, but Doña Marina's actions while with the Spaniards demonstrate that she saw in her new position an opportunity to survive and maybe even improve her station in life. Her ability to translate for Cortés most likely elevated her status in the party and granted her certain protections.

In other instances the daughters of royalty were given to Cortés. Montezuma, the leader at the time Cortés arrived in the Aztec capital, offered his daughter to Cortés. Cortés politely turned down the offer and gave her to another conqueror; however, it was clearly an attempt by Montezuma to create an alliance with the Spaniards.⁵⁰ One of his daughters, called Doña Isabel by the Spaniards, was married to six indigenous or Spanish leaders. She was originally married to the supposed successor of her father, followed by marriages to the next two Aztec leaders. After the fall of Tenochtitlán she spent time with Cortés before marrying three more Spanish men, each lasting until her husband died. This practice was customary for the indigenous women even before the arrival of the Spanish in order to create alliances with other indigenous groups.⁵¹ In these instances the women seemed to be carrying out a duty expected of them and their social position. They entered into relationships with Spanish men in order to further alliances between their people and the Spanish.

From this analysis it can be seen that indigenous women were not merely passive bystanders, succumbing automatically to the wishes of the Spaniards. While they may not have had full autonomy in all of their decisions, some of the choices they made were motivated by personal goals, feelings of loyalty to their obligations, or an instinct to survive and make the most of the situations that were beyond their control.

⁵⁰ Diaz, 276.

⁵¹ Powers, 72-73.

Conclusion

Religious conversion was used to assimilate the indigenous people and to spread the influence of the Spanish Crown while interracial relationships were employed in order to gain wealth and territory. Women were subjected to forced conversion as well as forced relationships with Spanish men. However, some of these women made choices to convert or to embrace their conversion as well as to enter into relationships with Spanish men for a variety of reasons.

The Spanish conquest of Mexico is often depicted as a bloody overtaking by men with superior military technology; however, it was more than a military overtaking. Religious conversion and relationships with indigenous women also advanced the success of the Spaniards. Thus, women were not absent from the events of the conquest. It was not solely a male versus male conflict. Women's choices and motivations may remain unclear to us due to the lack of written sources by indigenous women, but it can be determined that women were active participants in their own lives who made choices and pursued goals. However, women's autonomy was compromised by the Spaniards' patriarchal ideology which limited their views of indigenous women.

In the years following the initial takeover of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the roles of indigenous women would continue to be affected by the Spanish. Initially following the conquest, indigenous women outnumbered men in the colonial society, thus allowing them to take on more leadership roles.⁵² However, the Spanish patriarchal and hierarchical colonial structure soon took effect and indigenous women's status waned. Women began to

⁵² Susan Kellogg, "From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal," in *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, ed. Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 133-134.

lose their independence as they became less able to own property individually or maintain themselves as separate legal entities from their husbands. Also, these women lost their positions of authority as indigenous social institutions declined.⁵³ They were treated more and more as legal minors, but indigenous women also continued to exercise choice and an active role in Spanish colonial society. Many women participated in rebellions as well as private ritual practices, such as sexual witchcraft and matchmaking, which went against the Catholic Church and the domination of the patriarchal society.⁵⁴ These practices show that even though women's status declined under the patriarchal colonial rule of the Spanish, many indigenous women found ways to exercise their own autonomy through their new prescribed roles.

Despite the fluctuating status of native women in colonial society, indigenous women would continue to marry or become involved with Spanish men, give birth to mestizo children, and be converted to Catholicism. The continued contact between Spanish men and indigenous women would lead to the development of a racial caste system in Spanish America that would continue to rule with patriarchal and religious hegemony for many years.

⁵³ Kellogg, 139-140.

⁵⁴ Kellogg, 141.

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