

Indigenous Religion

By Spanish Colonizers

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The interference and conquest by European powers made acquiring accurate information about the Native people prior to the 1500s a complex issue. Their religion, according to the Spaniards, was delegitimized and their practices were deemed “evil”, compared to Catholicism. Equally important is that not all Indigenous people used the same practices. Because of varied religious views and multiple geographical locations, each of their practices varied. This essay will first have a source analysis of the accounts of Ramón Pane, Pedro de Cieza de León, then Bernal Díaz. Following the source analysis, I will analyze specific passages from each source that outline the religious practices of different Indigenous populations. This can lead to a more profound understanding of what religious practices the Indigenous followed from the Indies, Central Mexico, and South America, despite the bias found in these accounts. The substantial number of accounts from the Spanish provides a glimpse of Indigenous life. However, this glimpse can be minimal, as the profound biases imbedded in Spanish accounts alter the accuracy of the information and requires a different strategy to have a better comprehension of what kind of spirituality the Indigenous had.

When Ramón Pane, a missionary priest, went on Christopher Columbus’ second voyage in 1493, he was to convert the Indigenous to Catholicism.¹ He lived with the Taino and eventually learned the Taino language.² Because of this, he could record the religious practices of the Taino, as commanded by Columbus.³

1 Ramón Pane, “A Report concerning the Antiquities of the Indians,” in *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, 4th edition, ed. Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage, 2001), 396-401.

2 Pane, “A Report,” 396.

3 Pane, “A Report,” 396.

The detailed descriptions of his records, however, had a long and complicated journey before publication. His accounts were ignored for some time because of a lack comprehension of Taino spirituality by the public.⁴ It was Fernando Colón, Columbus' son, who took interest in his work and implemented it into Columbus' biography *History of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son*.⁵ Translation from Spanish to Italian would not occur until 1571, yet the translation had missing portions. Additionally, the original copy from Pane was lost.⁶ In sum, not only was Pane's worldview comprised of European and Christian values, but the translations likely missed key information about the Taino. He only interacted with the Taino and only wrote "of the Indians of the island of Española, for [he knew] nothing about the other islands and [had] never seen them."⁷

Because his records only apply to the Island of Hispaniola, we cannot conclude anything else about other Indigenous groups. Initial entries contain basic information about Taino religion, their deities, and later focuses on their spiritual practices. Specifically, he records the process for healing a sick person and how it connects to their spirituality. The overall tone of his writing appears aggressive and dismissive, criticizing their traditions and religious leaders. This was especially present in the passage on healing the ill. His bias reveals itself when he proclaims that the *bohutís*, or religious leaders, "practice great frauds upon the Indians" by having them believe they "speak with the dead"⁸ and "[declare] that they are speaking with the *cemis*" which are the physical figures for the Taino.⁹ The lack of spiritual comprehension by Pane could have altered how he wrote about their religious practices. From the perspective of the Taino, their healing practices and ability to speak with the dead make complete sense. For Pane, who has a European and Christian perspective, he couldn't comprehend their perspective and would automatically assume it to be false.

Similarly to Ramón Pane, Pedro de Cieza de León also traveled to the "New World" and spent 16 years in Cartagena. During his stay, he learned Quechua and communicated directly with the Indigenous population. Cieza de León celebrated the work the Spanish did for the conquest and encouraged the conversion of the Indigenous. However, unlike Pane, he criticizes the approach of the Spanish, having said that their behavior had been unacceptable and cruel. He was one of the first to criticize the Spanish's behavior and proclaimed that the natives were equally as human as they were, making for quite the controversial statement at that time. In the passages of *The Incas*, he describes their lifestyle and details their social and political system, their personal behavior, imbedding parts of their religious beliefs and practices. It is important to note, however, that The

4 Pane, "A Report," 396.

5 Pane, "A Report," 396.

6 Pane, "A Report," 396.

7 Pane, "A Report," 396.

8 Pane, "A Report," 398.

9 Pane, "A Report," 398-399

Incas passages did not primarily focus on religion, as did the sources of Ramón Pane and Bernal Díaz. In some sections, he praises the landscape and structures that the Incas built, and other sections picture their lands as fertile and rich with resources and precious ores. Early on, he states that it is an atrocity that “these idol-worshipping Incas should have had such wisdom in knowing how to govern and preserve these far-flung lands, and that we, Christians, have destroyed so many kingdoms.”¹⁰

The prior section can perfectly encapsulate the bias Díaz holds, including his condemnation of what the colonizing powers had done. Using “idol worshiping” signals the heresy that he believed the Incas follow yet confidently proclaims the problems created by the Spanish inquisition. One possibly questionable trait of his writing is how he writes that any other tribe or group of indigenous people willingly submit to the Incas. When their soldiers go off on conquests, Cieza de León frequently elaborated on the generosity the Incas had towards any people they conquered by offering them “as much and as many lands, fields and houses as they had left.”¹¹ Cieza de León also said that they could easily conquer by “[trying] to do things by fair means” in their conquests.¹² They strategically outwitted their enemy and “entered many lands without war”, which all of these observations by him imply a perfect leadership and system of the Inca.¹³ If he did have a positive view of their rulership and said that there are no flaws within it, which he did compare the Spanish and their lands and rulership, then he may have exaggerated some details about other traits of living by the Incas, including religious practices.

With Bernal Díaz’s exploration, he recalls the exchanges with the Indigenous of Tenochtitlan and recorded their actions. His accounts are different because he wrote *The Conquest of New Spain* decades after he went on these voyages to Mexico. His writing contains many details, but these details could be falsified or be missing portions of essential information because of how long after the events it was written. This text also went through other translations before finalization, creating more possibilities for lost information. He uses celebratory language about how him and his men succeeded in their conquest of Tenochtitlan. He primarily wrote this account to glorify Spain, as well as being his last will and testament. Words such as “my comrades; all true conquerors, who served His Majesty” and “this expedition being undertaken by our own efforts” all explicitly declare that the collective efforts of the Spanish participants should be celebrated and revered for their work.¹⁴ Including the work done by men, Díaz wrote a pas-

10 Pedro de Cieza de León, *The Incas*, ed. and trans. Harriet de Onis and Victor Wolfgang von Hagen (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 62.

11 Cieza de León, *The Incas*, 60.

12 Cieza de León, *The Incas*, 158.

13 Cieza de León, *The Incas*, 159.

14 Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, ed. and trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1963), 15

sage about Doña Marina, an Indigenous woman who was eventually given away to Hernán Cortes, a Spanish captain.¹⁵ Her mother and stepfather gave her away to other Indigenous people and later become a translator for the Spaniards.¹⁶ Her role was indispensable to the Spanish because she could communicate in Tabascan and the language of Coatzacoalcos.¹⁷ Díaz proclaimed that without her, they “could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico.”¹⁸ He clearly perceived Doña Marina as a valuable resource. Later passages outline the entrance of the Spanish into Mexico. Their arrival caused tension among the Indigenous, with Montezuma, the leader in Tenochtitlan, greeting the Spaniards with open arms. The welcoming reaction by Montezuma and his vassals is explained by the belief that their ancestors prophesized that there would be men who “would come from the direction of the sunrise to rule over [their] lands.”¹⁹ Even with Montezuma welcoming the Spanish with great attention, Díaz reiterates that their plan was to convert Montezuma and their population that their gods beliefs, were false.

Knowing that Pane, Cieza de León and Díaz all have European and especially Christian lenses that warp their perception of the Indigenous, this impacted their writing. Beginning with seemingly the most aggressive writing, Pane dove right into what the Taino people on the island of Hispaniola practiced. The most common practice described by Pane is the use of cemís, which can be comprised of varied materials. Because of its neutral description about what it’s made of and what it does, it can be more confidently concluded that cemís were crucial in their spirituality. Examining his neutral statements, he describes that they are “made of stone or wood” and have many uses such as “some that speak, others that cause food plants to grow, others that bring rain, and others that make winds blow.”²⁰ This neutral description can be potentially conclusive, since it merely makes a general description of Taino practices. However, directly after that passage, he went on a tangent saying, “these simple, ignorant people” believe “that these idols or rather demons do all these things.”²¹ This biased and irate statement is similar to how Cieza de León described the practices from Cartagena. In the earlier passages of his writing, he describes the Apurímac River and its surroundings. Across the river were the lodgings of the Incas and the location of an oracle where “the devil gave answers through the trunk of a tree, so the Indians say.”²² Again, this is a description with Christian beliefs attached to it. This needs to be kept in mind when reading his later passages. The most neutral statements by him were

15 Díaz, *New Spain*, 85.

16 Díaz, *New Spain*, 85.

17 Díaz, *New Spain*, 86.

18 Díaz, *New Spain*, 87.

19 Díaz, *New Spain*, 220.

20 Pane, “A Report,” 398.

21 Pane, “A Report,” 398.

22 Cieza de León, *The Incas*, 134.

the process when the Inca overtook another indigenous group, with the newly overtaken natives being “ordered to worship the sun as God.”²³ Another neutral observation implies that it’s a direct description and can likely confirm that the Inca did see the sun as their god.

Out of the three men, Bernal Díaz had the most substance regarding religious practices. As stated prior, he makes it clear that they were there for the Spanish conquest and the conversion of Montezuma. With such a profound Christian lens, it’s highly possible that his portrayal of the temples and sacrificial practices in Tenochtitlan were exaggerated. To start, his neutral statements consisted of the names of deities they follow, such as Huichilobos.²⁴ It is said that the daughters of chieftains and other dignitaries “lived in a kind of retirement like nuns in some houses close to the great *cue* of Huichilobos” until they were married.²⁵ Again, basic descriptions can likely be taken as a fact. While human sacrifices were confirmed as a practice for the Aztecs, the exact details of the process are unclear. In Díaz’ eyes, the temples were a horrid place. His disgust towards the temples and the *cues*, where the human sacrifices were made, was most present when he and other Spanish climbed the steps to reach the top of a *cue* with Montezuma. Describing the walls and floor as “caked with blood” and “the stench was far worse than that of any slaughterhouse in Spain” is graphic and grotesque.²⁶ Díaz claimed that there were many horrifying figures of their gods, along with a drum in which it sounds “like some music from the infernal regions.”²⁷ The *cues* also seemed to have, according to Díaz, “many more diabolical objects” like “large knives, and many hearts that had been burnt with incense before their idols.”²⁸ Examining this section, having figures of their gods in the temple would be logical, in addition to the tools needed to make human sacrifices. Regarding the gruesome scene, it’s difficult to say how legitimate that is, considering he writes with a Christian lens. How horrifying looking the figures of the gods were and how bloodied the *cue* was, should be taken with a grain of salt. Looking at the neutrality available in his writing, such as the most basic descriptions, gets us closer to the truth of Aztec temples.

Historians must work as best as they can with sources that don’t come directly from the population it’s written about. In these cases, acknowledging where the biases come out and narrowing in on the most neutral statements, can reveal more truth. Again, not all indigenous people had the same religious practices, as this varied on where they lived. It is important to verify the origin of sources, who they describe, acknowledge any bias, and hone in on the neutrality. It is a complicated task for historians to manage, but historical truth is essential.

23 Cieza de León, *The Incas*, 160.

24 Díaz, *New Spain*, 230.

25 Díaz, *New Spain*, 230.

26 Díaz, *New Spain*, 236.

27 Díaz, *New Spain*, 236-237.

28 Díaz, *New Spain*, 237.

The Indigenous had a rich and diverse culture. Extracting what may be true from the Spanish sources aides in the comprehension of the Indig1enous and their diverse religious practices.