"The Customs of our Ancestors": Cora Religious Conversion and Millenarianism, AD 1722-2000

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Using documentary and ethnographic information, an analogy is drawn between conquest-period (ca. 1722) and contemporary political and religious institutions among the Cora (Náyari) people of the Sierra del Nayar in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico. Fundamental to these political and religious institutions—then and now—is the idea that the deceased elders of the Cora people continue as active agents in the lives of living Coras, particularly as the seasonal rains. Based on this analogy, an inference is extended from contemporary attitudes of Cora people in the town of Santa Teresa toward the political and religious customs that mediate their relationships with these deceased ancestors, to the possible attitudes of Cora people toward their religious customs at the time of the Spanish conquest of the region. Millenarian fear, an anxiety that is widespread in Santa Teresa as contemporary Coras confront their own failure to adequately continue the customs of their ancestors, is inferred to have been a motivating factor in the Cora's acceptance of Catholic religious customs during the colonial period of their history.

Keywords: Cora, millenarianism, religious conversion, ancestor worship, ethnohistory.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I address a basic problem in the interpretation of the history of the Cora (Náyari) people of Nayarit, Mexico.[1] Why is it that this indigenous group, who successfully resisted Spanish missionization for nearly two hundred years after the conquest of Tenochtitlán, long after surrounding indigenous groups had been "reduced to missions," has come to reproduce Catholic-derived religious customs as their own, even in the long absence of priests or government officials?

At first glance this question would seem to deserve little attention. In other cases of indigenous accommodation to Spanish missionization the notion of "religious syncretism" (Madsen 1967) has been used to explain such phenomena. From this perspective it is argued that the Catholicism of Mesoamerican indigenous communities is neither entirely

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Catholic nor entirely Mesoamerican. Rather, a blending has occurred which accounts for the continuation of these religions. Perhaps the most common response of scholars to the problem of interpreting this blending is to treat the concept of syncretism itself as sufficient explanation, and so throw up their hands at the thought of ever unraveling such a knotty "cultural" problem.

Rarely recognized, however, is that the notion of syncretism itself fails as an interpretive tool because it assumes that "cultures," and not people, have produced and reproduced these "blended" Mesoamerican religions. The notion of syncretic blending draws attention away from the problem of interpreting the actual histories of sociological and psychological conflict that are at the heart of religious conversions. Rather than dismissing such conflicts as syncretic, in this paper I propose to follow the examples of ethnohistorians like Gutierrez (1991), Spicer (1980) and Trigger (1976) who compare a wide variety of data sources in order to build "analytical histories" of institutions central to the lives of the people involved in such historical changes (Fenton 1962:4). I will use this approach as an interpretive framework to understand something of the desires, defenses and motivations of a group of indigenous people who tried to make sense of the religious conflicts and social transformations that constituted the conquest and colonial periods of their history, and who then passed on resulting ceremonial customs and traditions to their children.

To do this I first examine the millenarian anxiety that underlies contemporary Cora life. Of interest for this paper is the common belief in Santa Teresa, the Cora town with which I am most familiar, that the end of the millennium will find the deceased ancestors of these people coming back to live on earth in a purifying rain of fire and blood. Based on this contemporary millenarianism I build an ethnographic analogy in order to infer a Cora point-of-view of the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Sierra del Nayar during the 18th century. This inference is then supported by documentary and ethnographic evidence that tends to confirm the idea that many Coras thought of the Spanish conquest of their homeland as a sign of the coming end of the world, and that they accepted Catholic religious customs as a way of heading off this conflagration.

Contemporary Millenarianism in Santa Teresa

For many Coras today the end of the millennium in the year 2000 is a pressing concern. Wars, plagues, earthquakes, hurricanes, and eclipses tend to be thought of in terms of a prophesied world-destruction. Stories are told of a previous world that was destroyed by a catastrophic flood.[2] In this story only the five highest peaks, which are thought to be the most

ancient ancestors of the Cora people, remained above the level of the water. As the land dried out a giant serpent carved out the twisted canyons and river bottoms that make up the Sierra del Nayar. This snake emerged out of the lake east of Santa Teresa and then slithered down the Arroyo Santiago before digging out the current channels of the Jesús María and San Pedro rivers and plunging into the ocean near the port of San Blas, where it remains to this day curled up on the bottom, resting.

Many thought that this world-destruction would occur in 1956. It was in this year that a young girl tending sheep near the Tepehuan town of Santa María Ocotán saw a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe who told her that the world would soon come to an end unless five *mitote* dances were held in all of the indigenous towns of the region in each of the subsequent five years.[3] She was also told that indigenous people should stop wearing rubber-soled sandals, imported palm hats, and silk cloth, and that maize should be sold at cost, "because it is life." The Virgin was later seen by young people all over the sierra and several towns began five-year cycles of ritual dancing in order to delay or survive the destruction.

Others thought that a total eclipse of the sun that occurred in 1991 would be the prophesied end. Prior to the event many influential Cora people dreamt of fire and snakes falling out of the sun. During the eclipse itself no one dared venture outside. Nearly the entire Cora population of the Sierra del Nayar hid inside their houses, expecting the worst. Although everyone survived this event, many now think of this eclipse as the beginning of a series of signs pointing to the end of the world.

More recently, the Persian Gulf war, the 1994 earthquake in Los Angeles, AIDS, a spreading cholera epidemic, and Hurricane Rosa have all been seen as signs of the coming apocalypse. The last of these disasters, while relatively small on a scale of global catastrophes, caused severe flooding in the municipal capital of Jesús María—nearly sweeping away the coordinating center of the federally funded Instituto Nacional Indigenista—and damaged much of the maize crop in the sierra. In the wake of this hurricane it was reported by eye-witnesses that a 300 foot long snake was stranded on a sand bar when the flooding San Pedro river receded. As 1994 came to an end only five years remained in this millennium, and local authorities in the Cora towns of the Sierra del Nayar rededicated themselves to their ceremonial tasks in hopes of again delaying the inevitable conflagration. Others, however, have abandoned traditional ceremonial practices entirely, and have instead become "Hallelujahs," or born-again Christians.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS IN SANTA TERESA

Evangelical activity began in Santa Teresa during the 1960s. A Baptist American couple regularly flew their small airplane into the isolated community, giving gifts of second-hand clothes to local people. However, the influence that this pioneering couple has had on Cora spiritual beliefs in the town has been small when compared to the deep religious conversions that have come about as a result of the evangelical work of a Canadian minister known as Miguel Juan Zelenitsky.

This evangelist has had great success preaching a millenarian form of born-again Christianity that its adherents in the United States call an "eschatology of dominion" (Chilton 1985). Scholars who have developed this teaching, many associated with the "straightforwardly conservative and pro-free market" Institute for Christian Economics of Tyler, Texas (Chilton 1985:319), center their biblical interpretation on the book of Revelation. This group argues that the Bible has made it clear that when the end of the millennium comes, all peoples and nations of the world will already be born-again Christian. Faith in the word of God means for them that thorough-going Christians should work to evangelize all corners of the globe so that this biblical prophesy can be fulfilled. In this task Chilton compares such missionaries to the first Christians who spread out of the Holy Land to Europe:

> It was the utter confidence in the victory of the Christian faith that gave courage to the early missionaries, who fearlessly strode into the farthest reaches of pagan Europe as if they were at the head of an army, preaching the gospel, driving out demons, smashing idols, converting whole kingdoms, bringing vast multitudes to their knees at the feet of Christ. They *knew* they would win (1985:11, emphasis in original).

Like these early evangelists, Zelenitsky centers his teachings on a strong, Bible-based disapproval of traditional ceremonial practices. He argues that these ceremonial practices are powerful devices used by the devil, in league with the Catholic church, to enslave the souls of the Coras who practice them. "One of the biggest things that the devil uses to destroy the souls of people," Zelenitsky writes in a pamphlet aimed at literate Coras, "are the customs. With these customs the devil is leading many to hell" (Zelenitsky 1990:2).

Zelenitsky, like the Coras he missionizes, looks for verification of millenarian prophesy, and so the pressing need for religious conversion, in the world around him. He argues that the drunken festivities that have recently come to overwhelm local ceremonial practices are a key sign of the need for repentance:

> In the festivals it is pure evil. For most people they are nothing more than an excuse to get drunk, to the extent that women and at times children get drunk. People fight until they draw blood, and I have also seen people die of gunshots. All of this is proof that the festivals are not from God. Today the greater part of your tribe is enslaved to sin and vice, and do not want to obey God. They love dirt more than cleanliness, lies more than the truth (Zelenitsky 1990:6-7).

Many Coras agree. Even those that continue to puff on their filtered cigarettes and drink beer in blatant disregard of the dire warnings coming from the "Hallelujahs" who follow Zelenitsky acknowledge that, "*kapuchemawa respetu*"—there is no longer any respect.

But if most Coras in Santa Teresa agree that traditional festivals have become little more than excuses for drinking and violent feuding, they do not necessarily share the "eschatology of dominion" predicated by the Tyler school. Instead, one line from the Bible best sums up the Cora view of the coming millennium: "the dead shall be raised imperishable" (1 Cor. 15:51-54, cited in Chilton 1985:147). However, for Coras, this line does not refer to born-again Christians joining their living brethren in a post-apocalyptic Kingdom of God, as the Tyler school preaches. Instead, many Coras think that this line refers to their own dead ancestors; ancestors who they fear will return in a cleansing destruction. As the end of the millennium approaches, Cora people in Santa Teresa keep asking me the same question: "You are a foreigner like Miguel Zelenitsky. Is it true that in the year two thousand we will all be killed so the dead can live again here on earth?" In discussing this fear with them it becomes apparent that people are not referring to the notion of a coming "Rapture," a favorite theme with Zelenitsky, but rather to a peculiarly Cora (or even Mesoamerican) form of millenarianism. In the following paragraphs I shall uncover the particular characteristics of this millenarian thought.

In cassette tapes recorded in the Cora language that Zelenitsky distributes free-of-charge, a redemptive Jesus Christ is called *Ta-vasta*, our-elder. Although Zelenitsky would surely see this as meaning something like "Our Lord," for Coras this is also the name given to the living elders who annually appoint local civil and religious authorities. Collectively these living elders are called *Ta-wósi-mwa*, our-ancestors-plural. Interestingly, rain clouds are referred to by the same name. This is not a coincidence. The living ancestors who name the civil and religious authorities are thought to be the same people who will become the clouds, and so continue to work for the benefit of the Cora people as a whole in their after-life. In order for these deceased ancestors to work properly, however, the elders who direct ceremonial life—the "living ancestors"—need to follow the customs, as did their fathers (and mothers), who are now the rainclouds. Other customs would not merely be ineffective for the

desired end of bringing the rains, they would be incomprehensible to the rain clouds themselves who received these customs from their own ancestors while they were still living in this world.

For this reason Coras worry less about the meaning of their religious practices and more about the manner in which they are carried out. For the same reason, changes in religious practice, either through a failure to complete ceremonial responsibilities because of drunkenness or apathy on the one hand, or because of conversion to another set of religious practices on the other, are thought to be dangerous for Cora people as a whole. Both of these attitudes toward traditional religious practices tend to be seen as signs of the violent cleansing to come. From this perspective both converted evangelists and apathetic traditionalists are thought to be poised on the brink of disaster, and so millenarian anxiety is widespread among both groups. Rather than an "eschatology of dominion," Cora millenarianism is fundamentally based on this uneasy relationship between living and dead ancestors, mediated by the religious customs that living Coras practice to maintain that relationship in balance.

But why is it, then, that Coras fear that it is just these dead ancestors, *qua* the life-giving rains, who will return at the bloody end of the millennium? To understand the linkage of the dead ancestors to Cora millenarian thought, one needs to recognize not only the benefits of Cora religious practice, but also its risks. Although the dead ancestors may support those that are still living in this world by providing rain and other good things, in the absence of proper religious practice they can be harshly judgmental. As Hinton (1970:20) points out in discussing Cora ceremonial responsibilities, "neglect of these duties can bring illness or death to the individual and ill fortune to the group as a whole." In Santa Teresa, for example, it is commonly believed that those who injure themselves or die in falls from their horses during Santiago's festival do so as a result of a failure to complete a vow or set of ritual practices. One man told me of the time that he was lured into breaking a vow of sexual abstinence just prior to the Santiago day festival. During the festival he became unbalanced as he reached out to grab a rooster that another horseman was scraping along the ground in front of him. His horse stepped in a hole and flipped head over heals, throwing him to the ground where he lay unconscious. All he remembers of the time that he was unconscious was a vision of Santiago looming above him on horseback. The horse was rearing up wildly and staring down at him with flared nostrils as he laid helplessly on the ground. He feels that this accident was a retribution exacted by Santiago for his sexual misconduct.

Similarly, scorpion stings, snake bites, falls, and illnesses of all sorts are commonly thought to be the result of "lacking at some mountain peak." Curers are called in to divine the location of the ancestor-

mountain that is angry, as well as the festival and saint to which that ancestor-mountain pertains. Even for the most sincere supplicants, the dead ancestors of the Cora people are thought to be dangerous and inscrutable allies. But given the number of evangelical converts in Santa Teresa who have abandoned the customs of their ancestors, and the number of drunken or apathetic traditionalists who are unwilling to complete the rigorous ceremonial responsibilities that have been passed on to them, it is understandable that these Cora people feel anxious about the coming of the year two thousand.

At this point in the discussion I would like to return to the question that was posed in the opening paragraph of this paper: Why is it that Coras have come to reproduce Catholic-derived religious customs as their own in the absence of local priests or government officials? These Catholic-derived customs include the worship of saints, the Pachitas festival, and most importantly for the present argument, the Spanish-style horsemen who appear as Santiago, the Moors and the Roman Centurions of Holy Week. Given the contemporary relationship between living and dead ancestors, and the millenarian anxiety to which it seems to be linked, it would seem reasonable to explore the possibility that Coras may also have held such beliefs at the time of the Spanish conquest of their homeland. I will examine this possibility through a brief review of pertinent historical sources.

A Historical Analogy

Although the Cora today get the attention of the Mexican government as only one of many "ethnic" groups, in the early 1700s they were a somewhat dangerous and perplexing anachronism for the colonial state. While the frontier of New Spain had moved northward, well beyond Zacatecas and Chihuahua and into California, Sonora, and Texas, the *nayaritas* stubbornly refused to accept missionaries. In the highlands of Jalisco and Zacatecas, the mountains of Durango, and the lowland settlements around Acaponeta, the pagan Sierra del Nayar was surrounded by Indian mission communities and Spanish settlements. For nearly two hundred years Coras had managed to turn back all the priests who had attempted to enter their territory, so that by the first part of the 18th century they constituted an annoying pocket of resistance in an area that should have been colonized more than a century earlier.

Spanish commentators familiar with the area tended to blame the survival of this "strange pagan state" (Hinton 1972:166) on the difficulty of the terrain. "[T]he ruggedness of this mountainous region," wrote Father Ortega, a Jesuit priest who accompanied the Spanish cavalry in their final conquest of the Cora political capital of the Mesa del Nayar,

> is so furious and horrible to one's sight that it startled the spirit of our conquerors even more than did their war-like defenders. Its broken terrain is not only inaccessible to one's steps, but its vast domain of pine-topped peaks and crags perplexes the eyes so that one can only reach their summits through luck. It is not even possible to ride horseback in this country as the abruptness of the terrain is hard on the horses and the steepness of the slopes frightens the horsemen (1754:2).

But while it is true that the Mesa del Nayar is protected by steep cliffs, it is no more inaccessible than the sierran towns of Jalisco, Durango, and Chihuahua that had long since been conquered. Indeed, individual traders had been coming and going from the Mesa del Nayar for more than a century prior to the conquest of 1722 (Hinton 1972).

Instead, a ceremonially based political confederation centered at the Mesa del Nayar, and "under the rule of a Cora priest-king" (Hinton 1972:161), seems to have mobilized Cora resistance to the entrance of missionaries or colonial government in the region. At the time of the conquest of the Mesa del Nayar the holder of this hereditary ceremonial position was named *Tonati*, or sometimes simply *El Nayarit*. This confederation, while clearly centered on the shrine to the sun that was overseen by this priest-king, seems to have relied on the support of a council of elders for its rule. Ortega points out that,

> the priests of the temples, such as the priest to the mother goddess, like those that guard the other principal deities, were the most distinguished men and had not only consulting, but decisive vote in the arduous tasks that were offered them. They chose the most apt for the office, a custom that they have always protected (1754:21) .

Ortega presents us with a description of these elders in a letter written by the Jesuit Tomás de Solchaga, who accompanied an unsuccessful expedition to the Mesa del Nayar from the Spanish settlement of Sombrerete in 1716:

> [T]hey advanced until two lines of armed men who numbered about five hundred came within our sight. They had more than enough people to surround us in a circle, which had us very concerned as we numbered no more than one hundred and thirty. At the end of these two lines came the nobility and magnate of Nayarit. They carried among them two old men who were like priests. These men came unarmed and between them was their little king or governor who wore on his head a variety of greatly embellished feathers and who carried in his hand a staff tipped in silver. Surrounding them were twelve captains and all of them wore crowns on their heads of beautiful feathers, some of them carrying weapons in thin silver belts. Accompanying them was a music so agreeable and harmonious that everyone thought it was a portable organ, although we did not risk asking about it then, both be-

> cause of the seriousness in which they came as because of our own confusion (1754:83) .

These twelve "captains" are also described as speaking for the rest of the five hundred assembled Coras:

> The two old men and all of the twelve captains, each one at a time, responded that they would be quick to give obedience to the King our lord, as they did the next day with all due solemnity, but that on the point of admitting the Christian religion they had not reached a resolution because they could not deprive the dignity of the sun, who they and their ancestors had always worshipped, and that they feared to incur his anger and suffer his punishments, adding that it would be very hard for them to abandon the rites and customs of their elders (Ortega 1754:84).

Like the "living ancestors" of contemporary Cora towns, these captains seem to have represented a sacred council of elders. Indeed, in rejecting the entreaties of the Spaniards to baptism, and so the ongoing presence of missionaries in their mountain stronghold, they sound like the "temple priests" described above by Ortega.

Elsewhere Ortega describes the "multitude of little idols" (1754:18) in the Sierra del Nayar, but points out that twelve of these, located on mountain peaks, had particular names and were thought to have special powers. Each of these twelve shrines pertained to a different "priest":

> The priests were so careful to safeguard the rituals, leading the prayer and veneration of their gods, that more than always keeping their temples clean and neat, they also did not permit anyone who came to offer an arrow, as they are accustomed to place there in order to entreat a request of their idols, who was not fasting. They also made sure that their fast had lasted the five days that one should fast according to their laws (Ortega 1754:23-24).

Presumably the priests at each of these mountain shrines correspond to the twelve "captains" who spoke to Father Solchaga and who served as the council of elders under the sun-priest, *Tonati.* Like the living ancestors in Cora towns today, all of these officials seem to have had a special relationship with ancestor-mountains, and so with the deceased ancestors of the Cora people.

Among these elders, however, the priest-king in charge of the shrine to the sun had a special relationship with the dead. This special relationship is seen in a description of the shrine at the cave of Tzacai mutta at Mesa del Nayar given by Antonio Arias, a Jesuit who founded the first missions on the coastal plains west of the Sierra del Nayar:

> [T]hese barbarians have a room in the house of the Naiarit with a table encircled by four shriveled and dried-out cadavers seated in the chairs called *ycpallia* with their arms crossed and tied to their legs. They are neither shrouded nor entombed over time. They are called Don Francisco Naiarit, Don Pedro Huainoli, Don Alonso Yoquari, and Don Luis Christi. Before there were another four bodies of their ancestors that, because of the state of the material, were removed and these were then put in their place. But they always carry the same name, except for the first names, as these names are found later, and after these they put others of their descendants of this genealogy, not like kings or natural lords, but rather like bodies that the seat of that cult and place of worship must always have (Arias 1672:17).

In this cave the deceased priest-kings, who shared the noble lineage of *Tonati*, came to represent the dead ancestors of the Cora people. As in contemporary ceremonial practice, the priest-king of the preconquest Sierra del Nayar, like the council of twelve elders, seems to have been a living representative of the ancestors who passed on before him.

In another parallel with contemporary ceremonial practice, the relationship between living political authorities and the dead ancestors who provide them legitimacy seems to have been based on ritual sacrifices offered throughout the ceremonial year. However, prior to the Spanish conquest of the Sierra del Nayar, human offerings were part of the sacrificial cycle. These human sacrifices were made to "Our father, sun," and so were presumably the responsibility of the sun priest-king himself; perhaps accounting for the ideological influence of this hereditary office in unifying the Cora political confederacy. Arias writes that in the shrine to the sun within the sacred cave of Tzacai mutta at the Mesa del Nayar,

> [is] a carefully placed well or cistern where at the moment of mid-day they offer blood that is brought from each of the *rancherías* in platters. Mostly they make these offerings when they kill some *Huaina Motteco* Indian whom they behead, gathering the blood in a cup. They toss this blood into the cistern as a toast to the sun (Arias 1672:18).

Another Franciscan priest, Juan Antonio Tello, writing before Arias during the middle of the 17th century, presents a more fantastic version of the human sacrifices that were offered at the shrine to the sun prior to the conquest of the Sierra del Nayar:

> In ancient times there had been much devotion to this cave. The sacrifices that they made were to each month slash the throat of five of the most beautiful maidens. The Indians would take their lives on top of a rock in front of their temple and they then took out their hearts and hung them up outside so they would dry. They saved them for the festivals when they would cook the hearts, grinding them and mixing

> them with the blood of maidens and young men that on that day had been sacrificed. They gave the hearts to be drunk in *atole* by the mothers of those maidens who had given their daughters so that they would live forever grateful that they had given their daughters to be sacrificed. They did the same with the fathers of said maidens (Tello 1891:30).

Although this latter version may seem exaggerated, an eyewitness account by Antonio Arias of the shrine that he had earlier described based on rumors would seem to place beyond doubt the importance of human sacrifice in Cora ceremonialism, and so the importance of ceremonialism in the special relationship between the priest-king and council of elders, on the one hand, and the deceased ancestors, on the other:

> On said day of Saturday in the afternoon the [Spanish] governor and I made our way to the *güeicalli* and removed the cadaver of the Great Nayari and his ornaments in order to remit them to his excellency...and also the statue to the sun, which is a stone that looks like a *tecalli*. We put a torch to the thatched house and the shrine and also to another thatched house next to it where they had their dances. Also burned were a blood-stained hide on which they sacrificed children, killing a child each month in order to feed the sun, as well as a hollow tree that was next to it in which we found a great quantity of small bones with the skulls of infants (Meyer 1989:36).

These documents show that prior to the conquest of the Sierra del Nayar the relationship between the living elders, headed by a priest-king, and their deceased ancestors was mediated by religious customs that included human sacrifices. Later in the paper I return to this issue in a discussion of the way that sacrificial symbolism, now connected with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, continues to be a central part of indigenous ceremonial cycles in the Sierra del Nayar. For the moment it is sufficient to point out that all of these accounts indicate a preconquest Cora religious and political system that is comparable to those found in Cora communities today. Traditional political authority was centered in a council of elders—in the preconquest period headed by a hereditary ruler—that had a special relationship with sacred mountains and the deceased ancestors of the Cora people. These deceased ancestors seem to have been identified with unpredictable natural phenomena, and so sacrificial offerings, including human sacrifices in the preconquest period, were used to placate short-tempered ancestral "gods." But if documentary evidence allows us to build an analogy between conquest period and contemporary Cora religious and political organization, it still does not allow us to answer the central question of this paper: Why did the Cora accept Catholic religious customs as their own?

The documentary record is inadequate to answer this question, because the Spanish were not interested in the motivations of the Cora

people they were trying to conquer, convert, and subjugate. As Spicer points out in discussing the attitudes of Jesuits in New Spain, "none showed any evidence of having made close contact with the world view or moral standpoint of the Indians" (1962:309). For the Spanish, native points-of-view seem to have been irrelevant when compared to the overwhelming desire, the "apostolic zeal," of suffering missionaries and hot-blooded soldiers. For this reason, in order to understand the motivations of Cora people during the conquest and colonial periods in the Sierra del Nayar we need to make an inference that might not be apparent in a reading of documentary accounts alone. That is, if preconquest forms of religious and political organization are analogous to religious and political forms that are the basis of traditional authority in contemporary Cora communities (i.e. a political system in which local authority is lodged in a group of elders—living ancestors—who are seen to have an intrinsic connection with ancestral spirits, the "deceased ancestors," of the Cora people as a whole) then the acceptance of Spanish religious practices during the conquest period of Cora history may well have been motivated by the kind of millenarian anxiety that seems to underlie contemporary religious conversions. In the subsequent sections I examine documentary and ethnographic evidence that supports such an inference, and so lend weight to the interpretation that following the conquest of their homeland, Coras began to think of Spanish religious customs as a ceremonial code for propitiating their own deceased ancestors.

Documentary Evidence

I am concerned here only with the attitudes of Cora people in the Sierra del Nayar towards Spanish-sponsored religious customs during the conquest period of their history, and so a discussion of Cora relations with merchants, priests, Spanish captains and even the viceroy of New Spain prior to the conquest of Mesa del Nayar will be left to one side. Suffice to say that during this earlier period the elders of Mesa del Nayar managed to keep the Spanish missionaries and government officials out of their homelands as they continued to practice ancestral religious practices. However, beginning with the final battles for Mesa del Nayar, documentary accounts provide evidence for an emergent division among the Cora concerning the opposed sets of religious practices that provided the rationale for Spanish domination and Cora resistance.

For example, following the conquest of the Sierra del Nayar an old woman, whom the Spaniards christened "the fortune-teller," reported that a violent thunderstorm on the day of a Spanish attack just prior to the final conquest of Mesa del Nayar was seen as an omen:

> She told him, and the rest of them at that *rancheria*, that they should not enter in the battle that was planned for the next day because the Span-

> ish would defeat [the Cora] forces, and that the best thing to do would be to admit the fathers and make themselves Christians, adding that they had all seen and heard how Heaven would help the Spanish with their muskets and allied ax-fighters (Ortega 1754:152).

The Spaniards also received word that prior to the final conquest of Mesa del Nayar the *Tonati* himself was inclined to accept the Spanish missionaries. He argued in all-night sessions of the council of elders in Mesa del Nayar that the Cora would suffer great losses in fighting the Spanish, and that the viceroy would be more likely to grant special privileges if they surrendered. The majority of the council, however, were resolved to fight if the Spanish attempted to enter their sacred town. However, despite this resolution, a pair of Cora elders made a secret trip to the Spanish headquarters in San Juan Peyotán as the Spanish captains were preparing their troops for battle. Expecting a Spanish victory, they pledged the households under their authority to the Spanish (Ortega 1754:155).

The Spanish defeat of a large force of Cora warriors at Teaurite, a ranch at the base of Mesa del Nayar, seems also to have caused a number of Cora to question the efficacy of their leaders and religious practices. Based on Ortega's description, the Coras seem to have invested this battle with ceremonial significance. Instead of providing the Spanish with a simple military engagement, as the Spanish cavalry expected, the Cora archers and hand-to-hand fighters waited behind trees and in gullies while a single Cora warrior, seemingly intoxicated with peyote, jumped and spun around the no-man's land between the two armies. All watched as he frantically pointed his drawn bow at each of the Spanish horsemen while letting flow a flood of contemptuous threats:

> First he raised himself in the air and then he threw himself on the ground without ceasing to talk and encourage the others, assuring them the victory by telling them that the deer were now penned up in the corral and that before the sun set there would not be a single Spaniard remaining alive (Ortega 1754:159).

After symbolically linking the Spanish to deer, a prototypical food-of-the-gods in the Sierra del Nayar, he pointed his bow to "Our father, sun" at its zenith and released the arrow that he had pointed at the hearts of each of the Spanish soldiers, signaling the Cora attack as he consecrated a sacrificial battle (Ortega 1754:160).

The Cora, however, were slaughtered. Spanish horsemen set fire to the Cora ranch houses near the battlefield, sounding their arcobuses as they celebrated the burning of "these festive lights" (Ortega 1754:164). The Spanish, along with their Indian allies, followed this resounding victory with a series of attacks, pillaging livestock and torturing elders at Cora ranches connected with Mesa del Nayar.

Arguments within the council of elders at Mesa del Nayar seem to have heated up in the wake of this defeat. An attempt was made to replace the priest-king, *Tonati*, who had argued against fighting the Spanish. Another patrilineal elder offered his help to the Spanish, and other elders were on the verge of surrender (Ortega 1754:186-7). One of these was finally convinced to remain firm in his opposition to the Spanish, but was less than enthusiastic about the fate he would be forced to confront. His final thoughts on the subject were reported through an emissary to the Spanish:

> I am resolved to not forsake this place, and I will be the first to fight, even with the understanding that I have told them all of the valor with which the Spanish attack; they never turn their backs, unless it is to the sun when they fall into the earth dead (Ortega 1754:188).

Perhaps such foreboding accounts for the half-hearted defense of Mesa del Nayar against the final Spanish invasion. Only one man, the same Cora elder that offered the fatalistic vision that is quoted above, threw himself into hand-to-hand combat with the Spanish, but he was quickly killed (Ortega 1754:202). The rest of the population fled rather than face the short-swords and firearms of the rampaging Spanish soldiers. The Spanish and their Indian allies immediately destroyed the town, burning houses and rounding up Cora livestock. The next day one hundred and four people from a ranch under the leadership of a Cora elder named Alonso were brought into the ruined town. This group was the first in the Sierra del Nayar to experience in their own lands the strange coercive persuasion that was at the heart of religious instruction in Spanish mission communities:

> As soon as the governor had noticed that these people had arrived at La Mesa he sent for all of the soldiers to come to the headquarters in formation. He executed the order and on hearing the noise of so many gunshots many of the Indians fell to the earth, others made the gesture of wanting to run, and they would have done so if the rope with which they were tied had not impeded them. On recovering from their fright they were led to the presence of the governor who with all of his company went to present themselves to the father. So that they would learn to revere the missionaries the first to kneel down to kiss his hand was the governor. With this example all the first corporals and soldiers did the same. Then all the Indians arrived one by one and that apostolic man received them in his arms, embracing them to his breast—an action that spoke to them. With this and the gifts that he gave them it was sufficient to pacify them so that the normal color that the fright had robbed them of returned (Ortega 1754:210).

The next day the patrilineal elder of another ranch sent an arrow, used by Coras to make prayers at sacred mountains, as a sign of their submission to the new authorities in Mesa del Nayar. This elder also asked a priest to come to his ranch in order to baptize a dying woman. Surprisingly, this woman, and later several others, made full recoveries upon receiving the sacrament (Ortega 1754:232). Later the sons of *Tonati* were not only baptized, but also sought ritual kinship with the Spanish governor and sublieutenant. Clearly, a number of influential Coras were coming to terms with the religious customs of the exacting new authorities of the Sierra del Nayar.

Indeed, the success of mission religious training was surprising even to Catholic missionaries. Although a group of Coras who had been living in the canyonlands beyond Spanish control attacked a number of underdefended mission communities, this rebellion, like several others, was crushed. Coras worked without military supervision to rebuild the churches that had been burned by the rebels (Ortega 1754:266). Ortega writes:

> The Nayeres, who before were a disorderly multitude of savages separated by the canyons and caverns of these mountains, are now congregated in eleven towns...none of them leaves without the express permission of their missionaries, indicating up to the day the length of their absence (1754:267-268).

Only three years after the conquest of Mesa del Nayar this priest could boast that,

> everyone knows the orations and doctrine. They pray the Rosary in most towns everyday, even when the fathers advise them upon seeing their continuous attendance that there is no obligation to do so. Despite this notice, all who are in town do not cease to pray in the church at sunset (Ortega 1754:275).

The ethnohistorian Jean Meyer has down-played Ortega's glowing report of widespread religious conversions, especially in the light of the anti-missionary rebellions and religious backsliding that followed (Meyer 1988:67). Indeed, the results of mission training do seem to have been uneven. In Jesús María, the Coras, who had been among the first to turn themselves over to the Spanish (Ortega 1754:212), were quite faithful to their missionaries. "My Indians" Ortega wrote in the midst of a potential uprising in neighboring communities, "are the best on the earth" (Meyer 1988:75). However in Dolores, Santa Gertrudis and Santa Teresa ritual curing and the worship of pagan shrines continued (Meyer 1988:121-58). Father Covarrubias wrote of his Cora parishioners in Santa Gertrudis that:

> They are such a backwards and lazy people and these religious things try them so much that only here and there can be found anyone who happens to know the Our Father or Holy Mother... (AGN, PI, Vol. 85, ff. 67).

However, despite resistance to Catholic teachings by many Coras it is important to note that a certain number of Coras in this rebel area were strongly convinced of the power of Spanish religious customs. For example, "an exemplary and very devout Christian" came to this same father Urbano de Covarrubias in order to complain of the bad treatment that he was receiving from other Coras who ridiculed his family's acceptance of Spanish religious customs (Ortega 1754:273). He voluntarily revealed the secret locations of important pagan shrines, which were then burned by the missionary (Meyer 1989:57). Even in Santa Teresa, where a number of rebellions flourished, missionaries had a good deal of success in involving Coras in Spanish religious customs. By 1739 Father Doye wrote that Coras were confessing during Lent, and that the processions of Holy Week had become important events involving enthusiastic Cora neophytes who whipped themselves as penance until they passed out (Meyer 1988:95).

The point to be made is that the establishment of missionaries in Cora towns, like the earlier defeat of Cora forces at the hands of the Spanish, seems to have set off an internal debate among the Cora as to the essential meanings of the conflicting sets of religious customs. Who was right? The priests? They were supported by a strong military and political apparatus, and their customs made reference to many of the basic themes of ancestral Cora ceremonialism—water, crosses, fasting, penance, the Morning star, human sacrifice, etc... Or were the Cora elders who continued to worship as their fathers and mothers had worshipped before them correct?

Based on our analogy with contemporary religious conversions, emotional stakes in this ongoing religious war must have been high. Then, as now, the practice of religious customs was not a simple matter of individual coercion or convenience, but was integrally related to the future of the world as a whole. According to documentary records it is clear that many of the same people who initially followed the religious customs of the Spanish priests later rebelliously abandoned these practices to worship at pagan shrines. These same individuals, however, were then intimidated to return to their mission communities after their shrines were destroyed. In many communities such shifts between the practice of distinct sets of opposed religious customs happened several times during the 90-year course of the colonial period in the Sierra del Nayar.

Documents show that millenarianism was a motivating force during at least one of these nativistic religious revivals: "It was announced

through rumors that the end of the world was approaching and a great illness would come. For this reason there was a need to placate the ire of their gods" (Hers 1992:182). But what about the motivations of those who, at one time or another, practiced Spanish religious customs?

Because priests and presidial captains assumed they knew the hearts of these cooperative men and women, there are no records concerning the sentiments of such Cora novices. But if our inference of a basic millenarianism at the root of Cora religious conversion is correct, then those Coras who learned complicated Catholic prayers, genuflections, dances, and songs may well have been driven by just such a millenarian motivation. The destruction and illness brought by the Spaniards following the conquest would then have been thought of by these Coras as signs of an imminent conflagration; much as eclipses, earthquakes and hurricanes are thought of by contemporary Cora people in Santa Teresa as indications of a coming "great tribulation." But if the Spanish forced suffering on the Cora, they also provided a sacred plan, a magical set of religious customs linked to an ascending hierarchy of religious and political offices—just as a comparable set of customs was linked to the council of elders and priest-king in the Cora's own preconquest political confederation. Many Coras were clearly impressed by these new religious customs. They worked hard to learn them, often going beyond the expectations of dedicated Jesuit missionaries. For such Coras these practices may well have been seen as a way to intervene with their own deceased ancestors who were manipulating events to bring a violent cleansing of the world. Scholars familiar with this period of Cora history, however, would disagree with such an interpretation. In the next section I will discuss these conflicting views.

Ethnohistorical Interpretations of Cora Religion

Thomas Hinton (1972) and Marie-Areti Hers (1992) have both argued that Catholic religious practices had little meaning for the Cora during the colonial period. Hinton, for example, argues that a long period of "pre-conquest acculturation" prior to the entrance of Spanish troops into Mesa del Nayar meant that the basic Spanish religious forms, particularly the Catholic trinity, already had a place in Cora culture. Of the colonial period he writes:

> [T]he fact is that there was no great and disastrous confrontation of cultures...[because]...[t]he Indians were already half acculturated and knew what to expect (Hinton 1972:166).

For Hinton the shape of colonial period Cora culture was already well established long before the Spanish actually began their missionary work in the Sierra del Nayar.

Hinton's interpretation, however, can not account for documentary evidence uncovered by Hers. She questions the identity between the Catholic trinity and the Cora pantheon upon which Hinton rests his case:

> From the documents with which we are concerned the Coras do not make the least reference to the Christian pantheon. So that this supposed early assimilation of the Catholic religion seems to be instead an interpretation based on superficial similarities (Hers 1992:193).

Additionally, although a number of Coras do seem to have been "readily missionized," as Hinton (1972:166) suggests, many others offered stubborn resistance to the Spanish. Indeed, Hers devotes her paper to just this theme.

Hers also dismisses the impact of the Spanish mission program on Coras. She argues that the nativistic rebellions following the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Americas prove that their mission programs produced no lasting effects. Hers writes:

> The intentions of the Spanish to divide the population through the means of a new political organization failed...because with the 1767 renovation the majority of the new authorities fell back on traditional priests and the Coras in this way erased the dichotomy that the Spanish wanted to impose (1992:192-3).

However, by focusing on only two documents, both concerning religious rebellion, Hers ignores the fact that the Spanish were firmly in control of Santa Teresa and the rest of the Sierra del Nayar until the Mexican wars of independence, another 40 years after a brief rebellion was touched off by the removal of the Jesuits in 1767. During that time enough Coras participated in mission activities that an inspector could discuss the good progress being made on a new church in Santa Teresa, and that all of the mission communities in the Sierra del Nayar were well established (Meyer 1988:275). Indeed, the documents of colonial-period rebellion upon which Hers builds her case are themselves the result of Spanish inquests that led to exile and jail for the leaders of the religious rebellion centered in Santa Teresa.

Hers (1992:193) points out that in confessions rendered during the trials of conspirators during the 1767 rebellion there was no confusion between Catholic and ancestral religious images by Cora defendants. She sees this lack of integration of Catholic images into the Cora pantheon as an indication of the superficial impact of Spanish religious practices on the Cora, who "dreamed of recovering their gods and their ancient liberty"(Hers 1992:197). However, such a romantic interpretation breaks down when confronted with the simple fact that when priests and government officials later left the Sierra del Nayar as a result of the wars of independence, Coras continued to practice a variety of religious customs

derived from colonial period Catholic mission instruction. Given that there was no consistent presence of priests or government officials in the Sierra del Nayar beginning during the wars of independence until well into the 20th century, Coras had every opportunity to abandon unwanted religious practices. This leaves us with a problem. Only an interpretation that can come to terms with the motivations of Coras for continuing Catholic religious practices in the absence of any Spanish presence in the Sierra del Nayar can successfully address the question that has driven us this far. In order to understand these motivations we need to go beyond the documentary record and attempt to understand the meaningful content of these Catholic-derived religious ceremonies for Cora people.

ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Of the Catholic-derived religious customs that Coras continue to practice, the most important for our discussion involve the Spanish-style horsemen who appear within the contemporary ceremonial cycles of most Cora towns. These horsemen show up as Santiago during his feast day, as Moors during the feast days for Rosario, Santa Teresa, and Guadalupe, and as Roman Centurions during Holy Week. The horsemen are of special interest, because at the time of the conquest of the Sierra del Nayar horsemen were for the Spanish a prototypical signifier of their own honor and distinction. Many of the Spanish soldiers during the conquest, and a number of post-conquest presidial commanders, were themselves members of the order of Santiago, whose emblem is a horseman. Additionally, Ortega (1754:204) reported that he saw a flaming vision of the horseman Santiago (Saint James) over the field of battle at Mesa del Nayar, attributing their military success to this divine intervention. However, in the context of the contemporary Cora ceremonial cycle, horsemen are not associated with Spanish themes or personages, but rather with *Tawósimwa*—the deceased ancestors of the Cora people.

The signification between horsemen and deceased ancestors in contemporary Cora ceremonialism is clearest in the case of the Santiago horsemen. However, by following the symbolic connotations created by the juxtaposition of signifiers in ceremonies as the calendar year progresses the representational content of the other horsemen also become clear. For this reason I begin this section of the paper with an explanation of the signification created by the Santiago horsemen in their ceremonial context, and then move on to discuss the Moors and the Roman Centurions of Holy Week.

Coras refer to Santiago as *Ta-yaxú*, Our-grandfather. This is the same name given to the center ancestor-mountain peak in the cross-shaped Santa Teresan *axis mundi*—*Ta-yaxú-ri*, Our-grandfather-honorific.

The Santiago festival falls on July 25th, in the middle of the rainy season, and Cora people report that the purpose of the festival is to make offerings so that the rains will continue until the maize has ripened. During the festival itself Santiago horsemen arrive at households and in a ritual speech they state that they have come from "San Belen," a land that lies to the East, the direction that Coras in Santa Teresa think of as the home of their deceased ancestors, the rains (Casad 1983:449). The householders refer to these horsemen as *Tawósimwa* and ask them what they are looking for. The ancestor-horsemen complain that their "animals" have run away, and that they have followed them to the house. In referring to their lost animals the horsemen use the term *k+'+*, rather than the more common term for animals, *visaru*. *-K+'+* is a suffix used in the Santa Teresan dialect of the Cora language to mark the ownership of animals (Casad 1983:187), but it can also be used as a suffix that means "deceased" (Casad 1983:208). By using the suffix as a noun, both connotations are implied. The Santiago horsemen are looking for their lost "animal of the deceased." In response to the accusation of the Santiago horsemen, the householder turns over a painted rooster, tobacco and a small bottle of alcohol, at which point the excitement of the festival begins.

The heart of the Santiago festival is the killing of roosters by drunken horsemen. The roosters are pulled apart by the horsemen as the riders play a bloody tug-of-war at full gallop across the green prairies of Santa Teresa. The festival ends after all of the roosters that have been offered to the horsemen by the different households in town have been killed. At this point a chick is passed from one Santiago horsemen to the next as they race in a group around the perimeter of the town. This chick is then "kept for seed" (Benitez 1973:140) until the subsequent year.

The paint of the rooster, the chick, tobacco and alcohol all index previous ceremonies during the year that increase the density of connotations providing content for the horsemen as "our deceased ancestors." The bright paint of the rooster indexes the brightly colored crepe paper of Carnival and Holy Week when a sacrifice is made to *Tayó xiká*, Our father the sun—the most powerful of the ancestral gods. In this context the roosters of Santiago's day, like Jesus Christ himself, are thought of as sacrifices to placate the ancestors. The chick also indexes Holy Week. During that festival this same chick is carried in Friday's procession, where it signifies that Jesus Christ has not really been killed, but has been cleansed of his sins in order to live among the deceased ancestors in the East. The smoke of tobacco is thought to be like clouds, and tobacco is used by ritual curers to "tune into the wavelength" of sicknesses caused by the deceased ancestors, as one Cora man explained it to me. Alcohol indexes an important symbol of the Cicada ceremonies immediately pre-

ceding the Santiago festival, and so it deserves a brief explanation of its own.

The Cicada ceremonies are the most explicitly rain-oriented festivals of the year. They begin in May, shortly after Holy Week, when the land is bone dry and the cicadas are whining in the thorn bushes. For these festivals Coras distill bottles of clear century plant liquor that is thought to be a type of sacred water, like rain itself. The process of harvesting century plant hearts and distilling them to liquor links a number of metonyms that form the connotation of century plant liquor with sacred water.

One of the many interesting features of century plants is that each year a few of them send up a flowery shaft near the time of Holy Week as a signal that they are ready to be harvested. Coras conceive of their world as connected by such a shaft to the heavens.[4] The upward reaching shaft of the century plant is seen to form a connection with their deceased ancestors, and "God" more generally.

The century plant also represents a connection with the world of the deceased ancestors through its distillation into liquor. The making of this sacred liquor mimics the process through which ancestor-rain is formed. The souls of the dead become vaporous clouds as they are heated by the sun, like the century plant mash is heated by a fire[5], causing them to precipitate as precious drops. Distillation iconically represents precipitation. Additionally, liquor itself is thought to be very attractive to the dead ancestors. "After all," one man reported to me as he carried roasted century-plant hearts to the grave-shaped pit where they are allowed to ferment prior to distillation, "if they liked to drink liquor while they were alive they probably still like it."

Through these practical connotations the Santiago horsemen can be seen to represent the deceased ancestors of the Cora people. But what about the Moors and the Roman Centurions? The strongest practical connection between the Moors and the deceased ancestors is that they, like Santiago, are horsemen. Indeed, Vásquez Valle (1993:277) points out that in the contemporary ceremonies of the town of Mesa del Nayar the same people who organize the Santiago festival's "rooster pulls" are also the Moors of the later ceremonies.

The appearance of the Moors in the ceremonies towards the end of the rainy season, immediately following Santiago's festival, also tends to link these horsemen with the Santiago horsemen as paradigmatic representations of the ancestor-rains. This relationship accounts for the interpretation that ceremonial heads of patrilineages in Santa Teresa give the statues of Santiago that they keep hidden in their households. These statues depict Santiago on horseback, wearing a red scarf, and trampling the Moors, recalling that his magical presence helped the Castilian cavalry defeat during the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula in the 1400s.

For the Cora, however, these Moors that Santiago is stepping on are not sinking in the bloody muck, but are rather rising upward. Indeed, Coras do not call these figures under the hooves of Santiago's horse "Moors" at all. Instead, they refer to them as "the dead." In this way a metonymic connection is created between Santiago and "the dead" within these statues—they both represent the deceased ancestors. As the ceremonial year progresses, and Santiago's day comes to an end, the Moors of Cora ceremonialism, like "the dead" in statues of Santiago (who are what we know as the Moors of Spanish history) rise up, and continue this representational paradigm of Spanish-style horsemen as the ancestor rains until the end of the rainy season.[6]

A published folk tale also points to the connection between the Moors with the deceased ancestors (Casad 1983:447). In this text a toad is sent out by the authorities to call the ancestor-rains in a time of drought. The toad arrives at the door of a far off land and inside, instead of the rains, he finds the Moors who attack the presumptuous interloper. The Moors of this folk tale, like their representations in ceremony, comprise a military cavalry. The musicians for the Moors are made up of two drummers and a *chirimía* trumpet player who play a driving marshal tune. The two lead horsemen of the Moors carry insignia flags, just as the Spanish cavalry were led by flagmen (Ortega 1754:150). Coras call these flags the *xandárutse,* the soldiers.

The ceremonies that the Moors take part in are tied to both the ripening of the maize, which is represented by the female saints Santa Teresa and Guadalupe—both of them referred to as *Ta-ná:na,* Our-mother—and the appointment of the civil and religious authorities who will run the courthouse and church for the next year. Their participation in these ceremonies seems to represent the turning over of this collectively planted maize, considered the soul of the Cora people as a whole, to the living authorities of the town in preparation for the departure of the rains back to their dry-season home. This departure is portrayed during the All Souls ceremonies, which also make telling reference to *Tayaxú,* Our-grandfather-Santiago, and leads us to an explanation of the meaning of the Centurion horsemen during Holy Week.

During the night of the Day of the Dead little boys who represent owls go to each household asking for offerings by hooting out "*Heloti* (maize), *k+'+, k+'+, k+'+. Xutsí* (squash), *k+'+, k+'+, k+'+. Yaná* (tobacco), *k+'+, k+'+, k+'+...*" They mimic the sound of owls while again playing on the suffix that means "deceased." Coras report that these owls, who represent the souls of the dead (Benitez 1973:122), are stocking up on provisions for the return to their dry season home.

During these ceremonies, Coras bring flowers to the church where they are piled up to form the image of a dead man—*Tayaxuk+'+,* Our-deceased-grandfather. The flower image is covered with the same

shroud that will eventually hide a representation of the crucified Christ during Holy Week. Viviano Gomez Aranda, a patrilineal elder, explains the connection between Our Deceased Grandfather and Jesus Christ:

PEC: What is *Tayaxuk+'+*?
VGA: This is of the deceased...of the deceased. You say *tayaxuk+'+*. Like my grandfathers, right.
PEC: Like Paulinario also? [VGA's late father]
VGA: There you go, there you go. Like my late father. Like...you say *tayaxuk+'+*. The little kids can say it like that. Well, my kids...*tayaxuk+'+*. That's how it is...that is...that's the custom, just like that.
PEC: Ah ha...but also like...that is...well this could be crazy, but I think not. That Enriques was telling me that he was going to...or that he was thinking of making a thing...with flowers.
VGA: Ah...!
PEC: Like a man, you know.
VGA: Ah! Ah. Of the...Of the dead man. Of the dead man that they're going to make there. But all flowers, like Cempual flowers, that thing that...
PEC: Cempual, only Cempual
VGA: But I'm going to put one the same way. They're going to make it just like this, they are going to lay it down like this, and this...But just flowers and nothing else...but they say that that is going to be like a dead man, you know.
PEC: And what have they named this dead man? Doesn't it have a name?
VGA: *Tayaxuk+'+*, that's it!
PEC: That's it?
VGA: That is the *tayaxuk+'+*. That is the Jesus Christ that they are going to make. Jesus Christ that is there laying down that they never take out of the box. That thing they are going to make there so that they see it there, that's the one that they are going to worship. And then in the morning...there the people who arrive just place a flower...and they are piled up, and like this. But long like this. Long like I am long. Like this. That's how it is.
PEC: What are they going to place?
VGA: Flowers, nothing else...
PEC: That's the same dead man that they are going to kill in Holy Week, right?
VGA: There you go! That's the same one. It's just that they make it...like this in these times.[7]

Like the metonymic connection between Santiago and the Moors, during the Day of the Dead a similar connection is created between Our Grandfather, who is returning to the land of the deceased ancestors, and Jesus Christ who is sacrificed during Holy Week. During the Day of the Dead, the two men who will portray the Centurions begin the religious

fasts that they will continue until Holy Week. Then, during Holy Week, just as the deceased ancestors represented by Santiago and the Moors turn over control of the sacred maize to the living elders who appoint authorities during the dry season, so these elders ceremonially turn over control of the town back to the Centurion horsemen so that they can carry out this sacrifice. This association with the death of Jesus Christ gives the Centurion horsemen their strongest connection to the deceased ancestors.

Although Jesus Christ is referred to as *Tavasta,* our elder, he is also considered to be the younger brother of San Miguel. San Miguel is called *Ta-hatsi Xúrave,* Our elder brother Morning Star. As *Tahatsi's* younger brother Jesus Christ is called *Sautari,* he who picks flowers. Frequently these characters are conflated and the younger brother is simply referred to as San Miguel *Sautari.* Coras in Santa Teresa report that unlike his elder brother who is austere and intractable, the younger brother is more human-like in his penchant for sin. He is born into the world of humans each year as the sacred maize ears that are produced from his mother, who is both the earth and the fundamental spirit of maize, growth and life. However, in living among the humans, *Sautari* becomes dirty and full of sin. Before the sacred rains can return to the world of the humans this sin needs to be purged, and so he is sacrificed during Holy Week, in order to return him to his celestial family and prepare the way for the rainy season. A song recorded by Preuss (1912:110-111) in the Cora town of Jesús María captures this relationship between Jesus-Christ-the-younger-brother-on-earth and Jesus-Christ-who-lives-among-the-deceased-ancestor-rains. [8]

> The one who calls himself Sautari,
> the son of our mother, had not died.
> He fooled them and went to his home in the sky.
> Already he went on the trail to the sky.
> Already he ascended and greeted his ancestors.
> He went past them; his ancestors did not recognize him.
> They did not ask. They asked our elder brother.
> He told them: "It is the earthly Sautari, this one is him."
> Already he recognizes our mother in the sky.
> "This one here is my son."
> She calls him and Sautari comes to his mother.
> Now his mother speaks to him: "Did you really not die?"
> Thus I know how to do it: I have fooled her.
> My younger brothers [people] appear only once.
> Is it not true that they die forever?
> I, in contrast, never die.
> I will appear on the earth continuously, but I will also remain here.
> Now his mother talks kindly and tenderly to him.
> Then she adorns him with sacred water and ends it.

She ends it and leaves him behind her.
There she encloses him with flowers.
There she encloses him with clouds.
There he will stay behind his mother.
There he ends it all.
There his words disappear.

The sacrifice to which this song refers is made by the Centurion horsemen who raise an image of the Holy Child to the top of an altar that is constructed inside the church. The altar is decorated with foliage to look like a pyramidal-shaped mountain peak. Although Holy Week occurs at the height of the dry season, people say that the blood of Jesus Christ irrigates the ground in preparation for the rains. Here, the relationship between the Centurions and the deceased ancestors is less direct than in the cases of the other horsemen who appear during the ceremonial year. Rather than serving as representations of the deceased ancestors, as Santiago and the Moors seem to do, they instead carry out the sacrifice that allow these deceased ancestors to return as the rains.

But although the Centurion horsemen are primarily associated with the deceased ancestors through this sacrifice, they also mobilize a number of signifiers that refer to the rains themselves. For example, like the Santiago horsemen, the Centurions are associated with alcohol and tobacco, whose symbolic connotations with the rains have been discussed above. Additionally, the colors of the Centurions are directly associated with the rains. One of the Centurions rides a black horse, and the other a white horse. The Centurions are referred to by these colors— *Cintureón t+xúmwa'ra* (Black Cintureon) and *Cintureón t+kwéina'ra* (White Cintureon). These colors index the wool and cotton fibers that are spun to make a "wheel of the world" (Hinton n.d.) for the Cicada-rain ceremonies. These ceremonies culminate with a procession in which this "god's eye," representing a cloud-covered rainy world, is placed on top of *Tayaxuri*, the ancestor-mountain peak, in order to call the rains. Coras in Santa Teresa report that the juxtaposition of the colors black and white remind them of clouds heavy with rain. Indeed, the Holy Week ceremonies should not be thought of as an isolated event, but rather as one moment in the seasonal oscillation between the dry season and the rainy season, the living elders and dead ancestors (Hinton n.d.).

To conclude this section, horsemen appear during the ceremonial year as Santiago, Moors, and Roman Centurions, and in each of these cases they are closely associated with the deceased ancestors. In no cases do horsemen appear without this signification. In the concluding section of the paper I will link this ethnographic evidence of a connection between Spanish-style horsemen and the deceased ancestors of the Cora people with the documentary evidence that was presented earlier in the paper. In this way we get a solution to the problem that was presented in

the first paragraph of this paper: Why did Coras continue Catholic religious customs in the absence of missionaries or governmental officials?

Conclusion

I began this paper by discussing the millenarianism that is at the heart of recent religious conversions in Santa Teresa. Based on this discussion an analogy was created between the religious and political conceptions of contemporary Coras and the religious and political conceptions of Coras at the time of the Spanish conquest of the Sierra del Nayar. From this analogy I derived the inference that the millenarianism that motivates contemporary religious conversion may also have been a factor in the acceptance of religious customs during the colonial period in the Sierra del Nayar. Three pieces of documentary evidence were used to support this inference: 1) Spanish accounts describe expressions of Cora fatalism and the sudden abandonment of native political authorities, and so religious practices, as the conquest drew near; 2) After the Spanish took control of the capital of the former Cora political confederacy many Coras immediately surrendered and willingly submitted to Spanish missionary control; and 3) Religious rebels testified that they were driven by millenarian fear, a common topic of gossip among rebel and non-rebel Coras at the time.

Through a criticism of the ethnohistorical interpretations of this period that have been offered by Hinton and Hers it was then argued that only an explanation of the motivations of Coras for accepting Catholic religious customs could allow us to understand the willingness of Coras to continue these customs in the absence of missionaries or government officials. Our inference of Cora millenarianism in the wake of the Spanish conquest supplied such a motivation. A key piece of ethnographic evidence was then provided to further support that inference. The Spanish-style horsemen who appear in a contemporary Cora ceremonial cycle were shown through a symbolic analysis to signify the deceased ancestors of the Cora people themselves.

Taken separately neither documentary nor ethnographic evidence is sufficient to support our inference of a millenarian motivation for the acceptance of Catholic religious customs. Documentary evidence can tell us that Catholic ceremonies were performed by Coras during the colonial period, but can not tell us about the interpretations that Coras might have given those ceremonies at the time. Ethnographic evidence, on the other hand, can demonstrate that in contemporary ceremonial practice Spanish-style horsemen represent the deceased ancestors of the Cora people, but can not show the time-depth of this signification. However, taken together these pieces of documentary and ethnographic evidence tend to verify our inference. Given that contemporary ceremonies con-

struct a signifying relationship between expressive forms introduced during the colonial period and an indigenous content that precedes that period, we can infer that this contemporary signification derives from the colonial period of Cora history. If Catholic religious ceremonies were thought of by all Coras as foreign impositions, as Hers claims, then they would have been abandoned in the absence of coercive missionary or governmental officials. Instead, Coras have continued to practice these customs up to the present day. For this reason the inference of a millenarian motivation for the acceptance of Catholic religious customs makes sense, and provides an answer to the ethnohistorical problem that has led us to examine Spanish colonial documents in the light of contemporary Cora religious conversions and ceremonial practices. Those Coras who accepted Spanish customs during the colonial period of their history thought that the world was coming to an end. For them the Catholic customs of the Spanish provided a new code with which to communicate with their own ancestors in order keep the world going. Coras chose to reproduce Catholic-derived religious customs in the absence of missionaries or government officials, because by the time the Spanish left the Sierra del Nayar during the Mexican wars of independence these customs were not seen by the Coras as Catholic at all, but rather as pertaining to their own ancestors, the rains.

ENDNOTES

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[2] This story was told to me by Viviano Gomez Aranda of Santa Teresa, but other versions of this locally well-known tale are found in Amaro Romero 1993, Hinton n.d., and Preuss 1906.

[3] This information comes from documents retained in the restricted-access community archive of Santa Teresa. See for example the handwritten letter to the people of Santa Teresa, Nayarit from Doña Consuela Aguilar dated 1956. I thank governors Agapito Dué Gervasio and Torivio Gutierrez Dué, and commissioners Beto Felix and Antonio Rodriguez Gervasio for allowing me access to this archive.

[4] Century plants brought from the homesteads of patrilineal elders are planted over dried-out umbilical cords after initiatory liquor-drinking ceremonies. During a linked series of ceremonies at the same patrilineal households girls

are given spindle whorls and boys are given bows and arrows. The spindle whorl is the same shape—a disk pierced by an upwardly pointing shaft—as a ceremonial pole that is referred to as "*chánaka*," the world. A musical bow is played by male singers in front of this pole for five nights during annual mid-winter ceremonies. In describing the world they live on Cora people describe it as similar to a spindle whorl. Prior to harvesting century plants to be distilled into liquor, a representation of this four-corner sacred world is made of these plants in which the flower shaft stands for the spindle of a spindle whorl or the pole of *chánaka*.

[5] Fire is thought to be another manifestation of the sun, *Ta-yo táih*, Our-father fire.

[6] Otilio Rodriguez Bustamante, a Cora man familiar with local ceremonial knowledge, denied that this was a proper interpretation of Santiago statues. He said that the people being crushed by the hooves of Santiago's horse were those who had not completed their vows to Santiago. At the same time he agreed with the interpretation of all of these horsemen as representations of their own deceased ancestors. He said, "why should I say that it is not that way if we ourselves refer to all of them as our deceased ancestors?"

[7] PEC: Que es tayaxúk+'+?
VGA: Esto es de los difuntos...de los *difuntos*. Eso se dice tayaxuk+. Como mis abuelos, verdad.
PEC: Como Paulinario también [VGA's late father]?
VGA: Andale, andale. Como mi papá el difunto. Como... se dice tayaxuk+'+. Pueden decir los chiquillos, pues mis hijos...tayaxuk+'+. Asi es...casi...asi es costumbre no más ésa.
PEC: Ah ha...pero también como... éste...pues puede ser que éste es loco, pero yo creo que nó. Este Enriques me estaba diciendo que iba...o estaba pensando en hacer una cosa...con flores.
VGC: Ah..!.
PEC: Como un hombre, pues.
VCG: Ah! Ah. De la...del *muerto*. Del *muerto* que van hacer allí. Pero puro flor, asi como cempual, ése que...
PEC: Cempual, de puro cempual
VCG: Pero mismo lo voy a poner así. Así lo van a poner, lo van a acostar así, y así... Pero puro flor no más...Pero dicen que ése va a ser como un muerto, verdad.
PEC: Y cómo se nombran ese muerto? No tiene nombre?
VCG: Tayaxuk+'+! Ese es!
PEC: Ese es?
VGA: Ese es el tayaxuk+. Ese es el Jesu Critu que lo van hacer. Jesu Critu que está allí acostado que nunca lo sacan de allí de la caja. Este lo van hacer allí pa' que lo veen allí, éste lo van a adorar. Ya cuando en la mañana...allí no más lo hacen los que lleguen lo van a poner una flor... y allí montonado, y así. Pero así largo. Así como estoy largo. Así. Así es.
PEC: Que van a poner?
VGA: Flor, no más...
PEC: Eso es el mismo muerto que lo van a matar en la Semana Santa, verdad?

VGA: Andale! Esa es el mismo. No más que lo hacen...así como en estos tiempos.

[8] This translation was taken from the archives of the Arizona State Museum, William Kelly papers, LA-82-30. I thank archivist Alan Ferg for giving me access to these papers. I have slightly altered the translation for readability.

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